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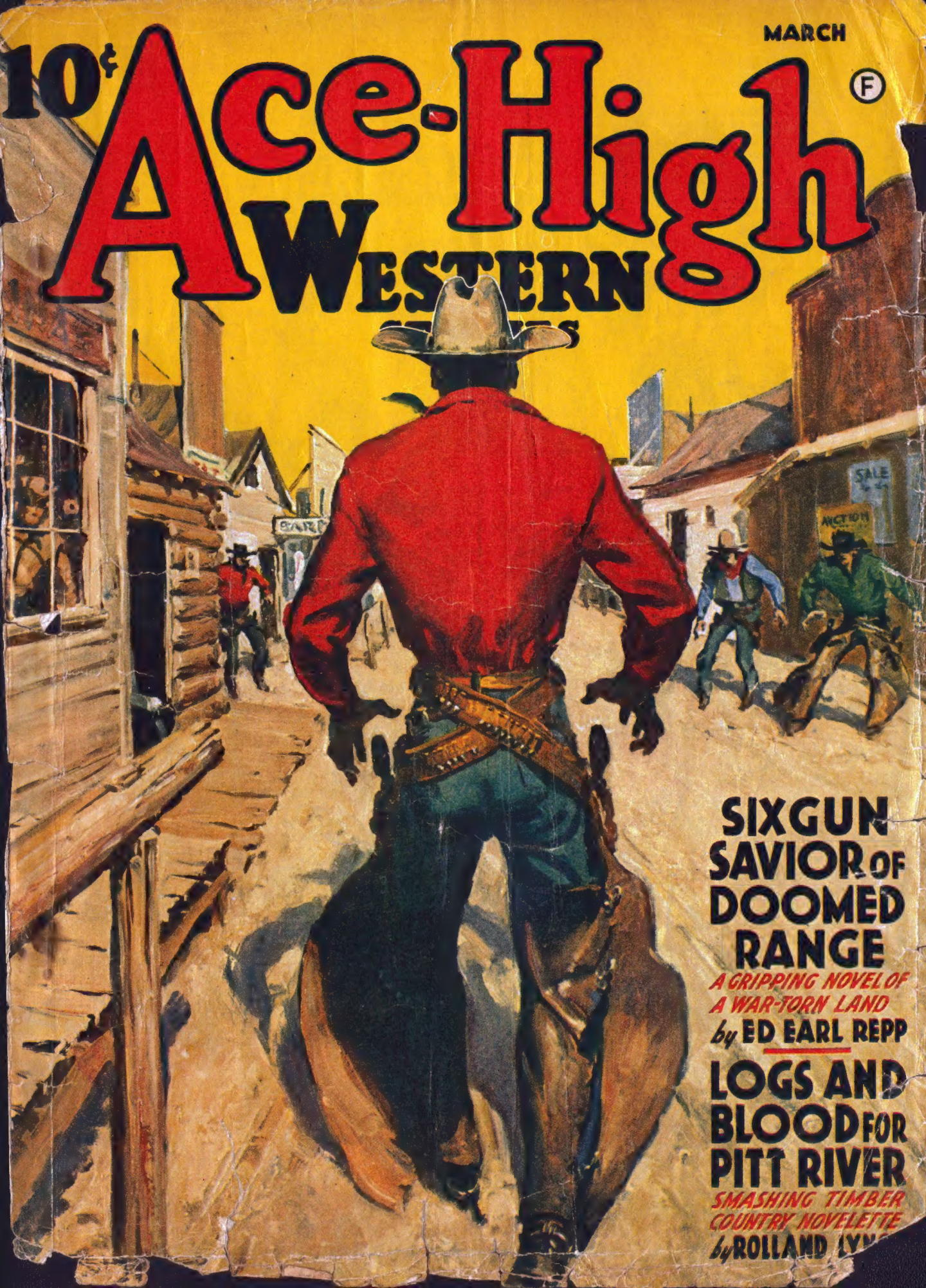

SIXGUN SAVIOR OF DOOMED RANGE

A GRIPPING NOVEL OF A WAR-TORN LAND

by ED EARL REPP

LOGS AND BLOOD FOR PITT RIVER

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Smashing Cattle-Range Novel

SIXGUN SAVIOR OF DOOMED RANGE . Ed Earl Repp 8

A fat chance Bill Bronc had of stopping that bloody range war between Scotty Hallett's ranchers and their squatter neighbors! For old Scotty had sworn that the only way to tame a bronc of Bill's kind was with blasting midnight guns and dynamite!

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Pete Woods proved that steel nerves can beat a killer's deadly draw. . . .

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THE oldster kept losing heavily. His grizzled face was flushed with excitement, and the hand holding his cards trembled with fear. It was robbery, pure and simple—the only difference being that Studs Duverne's gun was still in its holster. From time to time a customer at the bar would turn and look at the rancher, then sigh and shake his head. It was a shame, but it was useless to interfere. The rancher kept on losing till there were only a few scattered chips left before him. Then he got a good hand.

"Fifty bucks!" he said, pushing out his chips, his voice shaking with eagerness.

Studs Duverne covered him, then raised him another hundred. The oldster's jaw sagged with his disappointment.

"Hell, Studs," he protested. "I ain't got it!"

Duverne shrugged and proceeded to rake in the pot. Then he stopped.

"I might take twenty two-year olds for that hundred dollars," he said.

The rancher glanced at his cards again. "All right," he said. He took the pen and paper that Duverne held out to him and scribbled a few hurried words.

As Duverne's hand drew back, it paused for a moment over the stacked cards. The movement was deliberately slow, as though he wanted the old man to see him palm a card. The oldster leaped to his feet with a muffled curse of rage. His hand moved for his gun.

Duverne waited till the oldster had cleared leather, then his own hand swooped down and up. He fired twice, and two red holes appeared on the rancher's chest.

Those who saw it knew it was murder, even though the law would call it self-defense. No one said anything, and if anyone felt that Studs Duverne was working with the banker Brasenly to clear the small ranchers out of Green Valley, he kept quiet about it.

(Continued on page 6)

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(Continued from page 4)

Two months passed before Duverne tried his stunt again, and this time he made a mistake. He should have remembered that young Pete Woods seldom gambled, and that Pete had been keeping steady company with Eileen Clary, the pretty nineteen-year-old daughter of the man Duverne had shot down. But the gambler didn't remember this, or if he did, he noticed that young Woods was not heeled, and therefore didn't worry.

But he made a bad mistake when he palmed a card. Pete's hand shot out and closed on the gambler's wrist, squeezed till Duverne's lips drained white with pain. The cards dropped on the table and Pete picked them up and counted them aloud. There were six.

"You're a dirty crook, Duverne," Pete said. "I aim to beat the life out of you."

Duverne's fingers twitched toward his gun as Pete pushed back his chair and rose to his feet. Then the gambler checked his move. The youngster was unarmed.

"I wouldn't dirty my hands on you," he said. "Get a gun if you want to fight."

The kid hesitated for a moment, then nodded slowly. "All right, Duverne," he said. "I'll do that." Then he turned and walked out of the saloon. When he came back fifteen minutes later, there were two guns in his hands.

"We're going to do this my way, Duverne," he said. "Unless you're too yellow to take a fifty-fifty chance." There was nothing Duverne could say to that, and the kid went on. "There's six shells in each of these guns. Three of each are loaded, and three are blanks. Take your pick, Duverne, unless you're scared."

Duverne started to protest, then kept quiet. The thing the kid suggested was fair, and the crowd in the saloon wanted it that way. The gambler chose one of the guns, shrugged with elaborate unconcern. "Why waste powder?" he sneered.

Then the kid turned to the crowd. "Turn out the lamps and get outside," he said. "We're going to do this in the dark." Before the last lamp was out, he took a half inch candle from his pocket and lit it. "When that goes out, Duverne," he said. "I'm startin' shootin'."

DUVERNE'S face was like a death-mask in the semi-darkness. From time to time a muscle twitched on his cheek as he stared at the guttering candle. The flame flickered and went out and the room was plunged into a blackness. The gambler fired three shots in quick succession, and young Pete laughed.

"Nervous, Duverne?" he taunted.

Instantly the gambler's gun blazed again, and the kid answered his fire. That made four caps Duverne had cracked. The kid laughed mockingly again. "Take it easy Duverne."

Gunroar was his answer. Then there was silence that seemed to last forever.

"I'm coming to get you, Duverne," the kid whispered. Then his footsteps scuffed softly, slowly, across the floor. "I'm coming, Duverne. . . ." But there was no shot. The gambler had another bullet, but there was no shot.

The footsteps moved softly through the darkness, like the steps of death.

"No! For God's sake, kid, don't!" There was silence again, and those remorseless footsteps sounded once more.

"No!" the gambler screamed. "No!"

Then the kid scratched a match and lit a lamp. Duverne's face was like that of a corpse. His gun slowly sagged to his side.

The kid lifted his own gun, levelled it at Duverne's chest. He held it there, then slowly squeezed the trigger four times. "They were all blanks," he said. "All twelve of them. Now get out!"

Duverne left that night, Banker Brasenly left the next morning—and neither came back. Young Pete Woods had proved again the old truth that true courage, put to the test, can route, barehanded, the toughest of swaggering, bullying killers. It was as true in the West of yesterday as in the teeming, gangster-ridden cities of today!

THE EDITORS.

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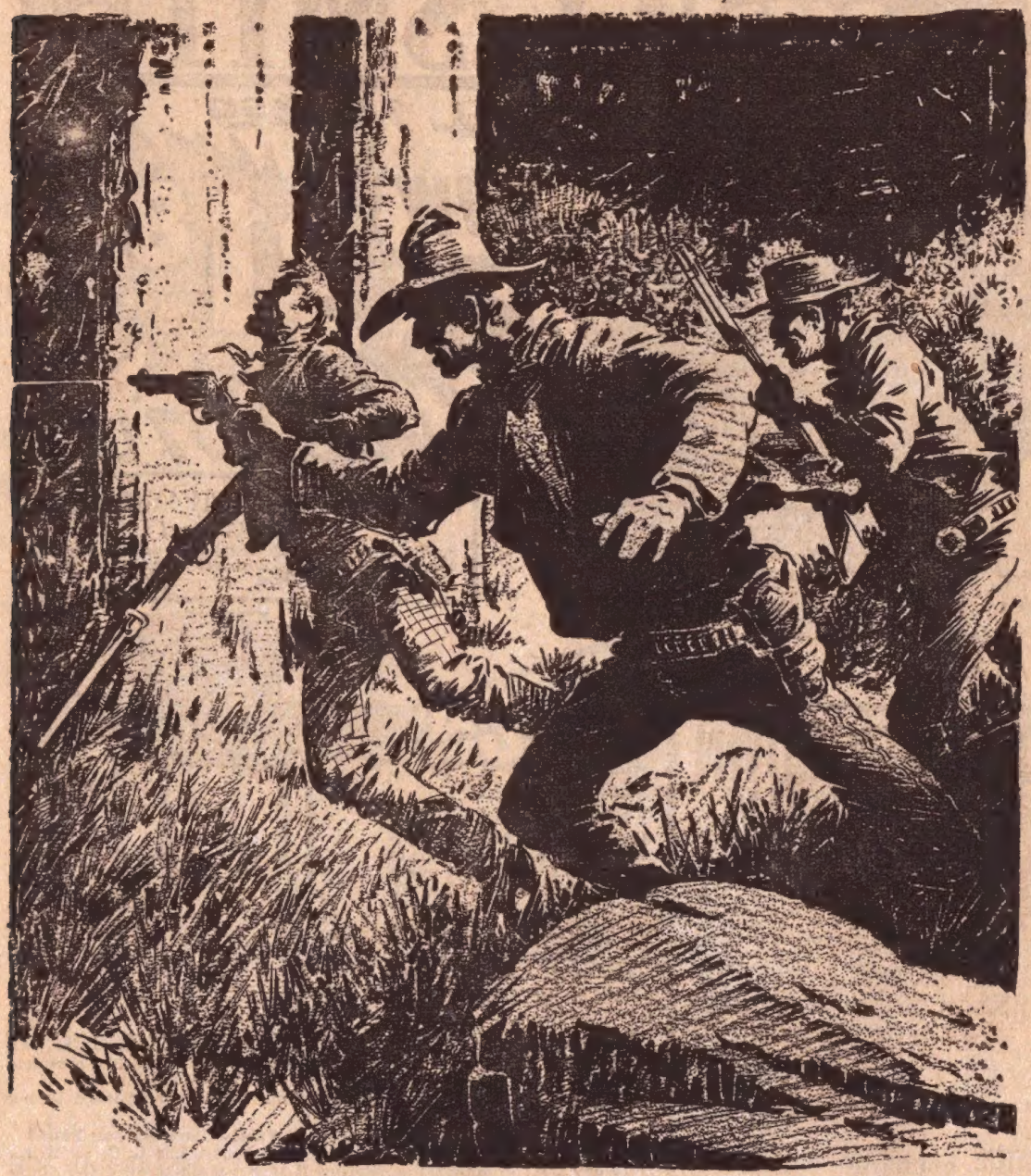


Ruthless, bloody war was scheduled for the Kingbolt range, and Bill Bronc knew that nothing he could do would stop it. What he didn't know, when he eloped with Scotty Hallett's daughter, was that he must soon return . . . to hear sixguns and dynamite roar out his wedding march!

CHAPTER ONE

Roll Call For Boothill

THE night wind whipped at Bill Bronc's face, and the scarred road smashed at the wagon's iron tires with the rumble of thunder. He drove the horses as fast as he dared, one hand clenched tight on the reins and the

OF DOOMED RANGE

The attack cut the renegades out and drove them at a run to the shelter of the barn. . . .

other around Jean Hallett's slender waist. His long, spare body was caught in a sweat. He had half a fear that he would miss one of the hairpin turns in the road, half that Scotty Hallett would discover Jeanie gone before they had time to win enough headstart.

"Happy, Bill?" her soft blonde head moved closer to him on his shoulder and he saw the flash of her gray-blue eyes.

"How could I help it?" Bill asked. But the misery etched deeply on his face said that he was lying.

They hated having to do it like this. Jeanie Hallett's idea of a wedding was a house crowded with joshing ranchers and their families; tables of food and tubs of punch, noise and color and gaiety. And later, after the ring was on her finger, trying to get away without being caught.

Instead, they were sneaking off, hoping to reach Sacaton by morning and be married. Then they would take a train and leave the Kingbolt country forever; settle in California, maybe, or Colorado. There was nothing left for them in Kingbolt—nothing but greed and hate. Scotty Hallett had said he would see Bill Bronc dead

before he let Jeanie marry a damned Devil's Canyon squatter. Hass Colley, head of the Devil's Canyon Grange, had repeatedly said that any canyon man who would marry into a cowherd wasn't worth a damn.

They passed the place where the foothill road forked off into Devil's Canyon and Bill had to saw on the leathers to keep his horses from swinging up the old, familiar road. His glance turned toward the Bluestone range, and something in him hurt at the thought of leaving his little horse-ranch and the herd of seventy-five broncs he had party broken to saddle. He would be starting from the beginning now, with no capital and with a bride to support.

From here on the way was strange. In Bill's searching eyes was a dull, somber despair. Behind him he was leaving men who would despise his name . . . and a stiff-necked old cattleman who would never get over the hurt they had given him.

"Don't, Bill!" Jeanie's fingers suddenly pressed his arm. "You're blaming yourself, and you must'nt. We tried—we tried hard."

"I still can't help feeling I'm being two-bits worth of yellow dog's meat," Bill Bronc ground out. "Hell's set to pop, and I walk out. Your dad needs you. The Grange will need me."

"It's isn't our fight!" Jeanie's voice held a ring of fierceness. "Why should we stay and fight each other? If Dad won't see what you've been trying to tell him—"

"It's not only his fault." Bill jerked his head. "It's half mine for ever letting Hass Colley get control of the Grange. Scotty and I were coming to some kind of a truce when Colley stepped in with his loud-talking, back-slapping hypocrisy. He's the sort that can run an outfit any way he wants with his slick tongue, and all I could offer the Grange was plain talk. That was good enough those first two years, when we were fighting drouth, but now Colley's got every man in Frijole Flat spoiling for war.

"Do you know what's going to happen, Jeanie? One of these nights, Scotty's going to catch some of our boys butchering his beef. It's bein' done, since Colley took over. Then there'll be a hangin'. And then, by the Lord, it'll start! I can see new graves up on the knoll . . . more of them every day . . . until the Tonto Basin feud seems like a Christmas party."

The dry rasp of his voice lost itself in the bang and rattle of the buckboard. Jeanie drew away from the lax embrace of his arm.

"We can't stop it by staying. Kingbolt can call me vain and selfish, and Devil's Canyon can say you ran off when the going got tough. But we'll still have each other, and the knowledge that we've done what we thought was right."

Bill forced a crooked grin and brought the girl back against him. "Fine kind of a bridegroom I make! My old man used to warn me about the black moods of the Irish, but I never believed him. I guess it's Scotty I'm thinkin' about. A good word's never passed between us, and I've wanted to kill him so often I've plumb lost count, but yet that old mosshorn's got more downright man-stuff in him than the rest of us put together."

It was the wrong thing to say. Jeanie buried her face against his neck and began to cry. Bill Bronc clucked the horses faster along the road to Sacaton. . . .

KINGBOLT range was sick . . . sick to its very vitals. Cowman and hoeman alike said it would take a powder-smoke purge to burn the poison out of it. Each thought of the other as the festering sore that was killing the cow-country.

Kingbolt ranchers swore allegiance to two deities: God and Scotty Hallett. Sunday was God's day. Scotty considered their prayers the other six.

For years he had been judge, protector, and *patrón* to the smaller cattlemen who had settled along the Ysleta after Scotty had run out the wolves and Indians. Scotty had come to the Kingbolt country when it was still as wild as the devil's horse and the odds were a thousand-to-one against his ever weathering that first year. Apaches . . . prairie fire . . . drouth. The gods laughed behind their hands!

But Scotty brought a crew of fighting Texicans from the Big Bend with him. He built houses and barns; built them with walls four feet thick of gray-brown mud bricks. He fitted them with doors and shutters it took a man's shoulder to budge, and broke the walls with loops. He dug a well under the house and stocked enough ammunition for a guerrilla army.

So when the raids came, Scotty outlasted the redmen and lived to hunt them down. And when prairie fire swept the plains, Scotty's men sacked and backfired and whipped that menace too.

He had established himself. He was here to stay. He was the big boss—a huge, bear-like man with a black beard and hair shot with silver—and secretly he fancied the title, "Law west of the Jornado." At any rate, Scotty never denied it.

But he never learned to fight drouth. It was a youngster the squatters called Bill Bronc who licked it.

Bill Bronc, handling the horses up the road toward the Pass, felt none of his former fierce pride in the way his mud dam had saved the crops that second season after he came with the squatters to Devil's Canyon.

Scotty had taken their coming as a joke. Kingbolt got its cow-country hackles up at the idea of hoe-men being almost within gunshot, fifteen miles up in the Bluestones in the shack-town they called Frijole Flat. But Scotty winked, taking it as a joke.

"Wait'll July!" he said. "The Ysleta'll run dry and their corn an' black eyed peas will burn to bacon-frazzlin's. Leave 'em alone, boys. Nature will take its course."

That summer was the driest in twenty years. The grangers nearly starved, and their crops were shot to hell. Kingbolt didn't hand out any free meals. The cow crowd waited to see them rattle away in their clap-trap wagons.

But Bill Bronc sat down and showed his hoe-men friends how they could build a mud dam for nothing and have water all next summer, and the summers to follow. Before their crops were laid by, that winter, they pitched in and built it.

And next summer they had their water while Kingbolt burned to a crisp.

RIGHT from the hour the first shovelfull of dirt was pitched into the dam, Bill Bronc's troubles started. Scotty Hallett roared bloody murder, stalked up and down his puncheon porch and swore vengeance. Those smoky years had made him a strong defender of the faith, but they hadn't given him any insight into the problems of weaker men.

It would have been bad enough fighting him, without having to worry about Jeanie. When Bill met her at a meeting in

Another smashing action-novel of a range divided appears in April *10 Story Western*. When the eternal feud between men of the soil and high-riding, gun-hung men of the saddle flamed in outlaw-ridden Timber Bend, Judge Lynch overruled the statute-book law—with a night-riding jury of hangmen. . . . You'll want to read I. L. Thompson's "King of the Vigilantes"—in April *10 Story Western*! On sale February 7th!

the town hall he began calculating how to reach some compromise with Scotty.

But the weeks saw the schism tear wider; saw Bill and Jeanie fall deeper in love; saw Hass Colley boost the young horse-rancher out of his Grange leadership. . . . Colley was a late-comer to the canyon. He rattled in one day with a wagon full of bar-fixings and liquor, and set up the Apache Bar. From behind the pine-plank counter he preached his drawling sermon. Compromise, Colley claimed, was all Bill Bronc could think of. Placate Kingbolt with free water? The hell they would!

Bill got kind of crazy-desperate. He reckoned that if he and Jeanie were married, the two camps might be united. But Scotty Hallett pitched him off his land when he came asking for Jeanie's hand.

"I'd liefer a daughter of mine married a Mex sheepherder!" he roared.

Bill's pride was so shot full of holes that his temper leaked out. There was a near gunfight. Every day brought the match closer to the fuse. Under Colley's subtle, stinging whip, the Grange turned on Bill Bronc, who had saved them from ruin a year before.

Bill Bronc and Jeanie came to the only escape they could see. Elopement. They had an hour's headstart on Scotty Hallett already, and with decent luck they would make it to Sacaton. . . .

Remembering all that, Bill gave the road all his attention. The path tumbled swiftly toward Sweetwater Creek. Rocks and trees whirled by in a jumpy blur. Dust boiled in behind them. The horses ran uncertainly in the darkness. Bill was driving too fast.

Thundering around a turn, the wagon lurched into the wash of Sweetwater Creek. Round, white stones flew high behind the grinding wheels. Then, with a surge of panic, Bill saw the washout ahead of them!

Instantly he was kicking at the footbrake and dragging at the reins. *"Red! Salty! Whoa—!*

Brake-shoes squalled, smoking. The wagon slewed and Jeanie came to her feet with the back of her hand against her mouth. The horses plunged from sight.

Bill Bronc felt a tremendous yank on the ribbons. He soared over the buckboard and sprawled across the back of a wildly-threshing pony.

The injured animal staggered up, took a step and lunged against the cut-bank. Again Bill was falling. Rocks smashed into his spine and he lay there watching the wagon drop its front wheels into the wash and come end-over upon him. A small form in a gray cloak and travelling dress flashed down.

A sledge-hammer seemed to hit Bill on the point of his chin and he lay limp among the debris of torn horse-flesh and splintered wood.

CHAPTER TWO

Back Road to Hell

THE nauseating, warm odor of blood was in Bill's nostrils when pain jarred him awake. A shapeless mass crashed down upon his face and agony speared his brain. Again, before he could move, his face was bludgeoned by something that mashed his nose with a crackling of gristle.

Bill came up on his elbows. It was his Salty horse, spasmodically raising his head and letting it drop as he frantically sought to rise. Bill clawed free, dragged himself painfully away.

For a moment, then, he was sitting at the base of the bank with his face buried in his hands. Nausea twisted through him. He was sick, with a feeling of blood loose somewhere inside him.

Abruptly, he remembered. . . .

With a moan, he stumbled to his feet, He fell against a wheel that still spun gently.

"Jeanie!" It was a hoarse cry that the night swallowed. "Jeanie!"

Bill ran stumblingly around the wagon. There at the foot of the bank, partly under the wagon, he knelt beside her. There was a ponderous half-ton to be moved before he could free her leg. With a broken single-tree he managed it. The leg, when he had laid her on the pebbly sand, canted sharply above the ankle, and Bill knew that it was broken.

So passively she lay that a frenzy of panic took hold of Bill. He called to her; frantically he rubbed her hands. A minute drummed past and she had not moved. Bill bent to place his ear against her breast. Relief made his knees weak. He could hear a thready murmur over the slogging of his own pulse.

It was when he tried to move her that he learned why she had not awakened. Blood matted the golden hair at the back of her head, where a rock had struck. Terror grew in Bill's mind. Fracture . . . concussion. . . . Sweat covered his blood-smeared face. All at once he knew he had to get her back to Kingbolt.

Red, his sorrel gelding, stood nearby. The crash had torn him free of the harness. Bill thanked God he had not broken a leg. The horse stood shivering while he caught the broken lines.

Bill strapped crude splints about Jeanie's broken leg. Before mounting he went over and put a bullet through the injured Salty's head. Then he was starting back along the road his carelessness had made a trail of tragedy. He rode slowly. The smallest jolt might mean Jeanie's life.

BILL BRONC wanted all this to be a malignant dream. He wanted to wake up and find himself in his 'dobe shack in Devil's Canyon. He wanted to hear his horses whinnying in the corrals. He wanted the feel of yellow sunlight on his face, telling him it was daylight and there was work to do.

He wanted to know Jeanie was down in the valley; that she was all right. But his arms ached with the weight of her, lying there broken and still, and he knew it was a dream from which he would not wake up.

Most of that ride Bill didn't think at all. Even regret couldn't cling to a mind struck blank by terror. In the room where Bill Bronc's hopes lived, all the candles had gone out. And Bill's numbed brain sat there shivering in the darkness.

Yet the sharp goad of self-preservation made itself felt once. There would be a riot when Kingbolt learned what had happened. A lynching; or Scotty Hallett would be given precedence with his guns.

Bill reached the hogsback where the road humped over into the valley. Kingbolt lay a splatter of phosphorescence in the flats between the shelving mesas and the river. A mile across the river, in a scope of shade trees, lay Scotty Hallett's fortress.

Hatred of the intolerant cattle king swept like a corroding flux across Bill's mind, leaving little pits filled with gall. On Hallett's narrow-mindedness and bigotry, Bill blamed what had happened to Jeanie.

From his almost constant searching of the girl's features, Bill looked up to see the town before him. At a walk, he turned the horse down Main Street. Jeanie hadn't moved in the hour and a half it had taken them to come. It was nearly ten o'clock. Until Bill came abreast of the saloon, no one noticed them. Then a man who came through the batwings saw and gave a start. Bill recognized Paso Anson, Scotty's foreman.

The lean, veteran puncher stepped down in the thick dust to stare. "Boy, howdy!" Anson exclaimed. "Hoss kick you in the face, squatter?" Bill remembered the blows on his face. His nose was broken and dried blood covered his face, his hands, his shirt. Pain flashed through his

eyes as his hand went up to touch the broken nose. And the sharpness of it brought a measure of awareness back to him.

A slotted square of light struck through the batwings to illuminate the burden he carried. Anson gave the jerk of a man who had been quirted.

"Jeanie!" He came dragging at his Colt as he strode from the curb. "Lord Almighty, Bronc, what've you done?"

Bill slid to the ground and faced the slender, graying man. "Put that away!" His voice didn't mount above a husky monotone, but its starkness halted the Rafter H ramrod. "Run ahead and rouse Doc Breaker. For the love of God, hurry, Anson!"

Anson hung back from taking orders of a Frijole Flat squatter. He looked into the girl's white features, his gun half-drawn. After that one look he sped swiftly down the road.

Lights were coming to a full flare behind the drawn green shades of Doc Breaker's place when Bill mounted the front porch. Someone let him in. Ma Breaker, a colorless bathrobe covering her lumpy figure, helped Bill lay the girl on the big kitchen table.

"Ah, the poor, wee thing!" She was dabbing at the blood with a wet cloth. "Bill Bronc, what have you done to her?"

"Wagon turned over," Bill mumbled. "Her leg's broke too. I splinted it up a little."

"Where were you two goin' in a wagon this time o' night?" Doc Breaker came in with some wood and shoved two sticks in the kitchen stove. He was a brusque, business-like man of forty-odd, short, wide-shouldered and gray. The scrutiny of the gaze he turned on Bill was direct and challenging.

"We were eloping." Bill said it without shame. He heard the surprised grunt of Paso Anson and watched Doc's brown eyes widen. His hand made a futile, tossing gesture. "Can't you work faster, Doc? She hasn't moved since the wagon fell on her. . . ."

DOC STIRRED the fire under the kettle. The wood sputtered briskly, but above its sound he heard the front door close noisily. Frowning, Doc looked past Bill, then again he busied himself with sterilizing his instruments. After a moment he turned abruptly.

"Bill, you'd better get out of here while you still can! Barney Sloane's holding one of his stud-poker-mortgage parties down at the Territory House. Scotty's there with Milt Cassiday, Tobe Leathers, and every other Kingbolt rancher who amounts to shucks. Anson's gone to tell him. If Scotty finds you here, he'll kill you deader than my pills can do anything about!"

Reason was not in Bill Bronc's numbed brain now. Looking at him, hearing his agonized plea, Breaker knew nothing in the world could budge him out of this room. "Will you hurry up, Doc?" Bill said.

Muttering, Breaker left the room and returned with an old six-shooter stuck under his waist-band. A year ago he had treated the bronc-buster for a fractured wrist. In the six or seven visits they had together, Doc heard the nester's side of the story. The frank way the Frijole Flat youngster argued his point won him over. Doc was a man who believed in honesty and fairness . . . even to a squatter.

The physician forced Bill to sit down while he patched his broken nose. He was in the midst of it when the front door opened again. Doc clamped his square jaw hard and worked on. Bill was sitting near the door, so that when Scotty hurried in they were face-to-face for an instant. Doc turned hurriedly.

Scotty Hallett was breathing hard, his heavy nostrils flaring with each intake of breath. A look of dumb shock paralyzed his red, blunted features. His wide, fight-

er's mouth was queerly twisted. Above the crisp, silver-black beard his eyes were somehow puzzled.

"Doc!" One big, hair-padded hand gripped Breaker's arm. "Doc—is she—"

Doc's voice had a softness to it. "I don't know how bad she is yet. You can help by setting down and keeping out of my way."

He pointed at a chair in the corner. Big Scotty Hallett sat down and watched, crouched forward tensely. Bill couldn't look at his face. Scotty appeared not to notice him.

Paso Anson leaned against the door jamb, building a cigarette that never seemed to get finished. No emotion altered the hard bite of his saddle-colored features. He had been with Scotty twenty years ago, when Eve Hallett died.

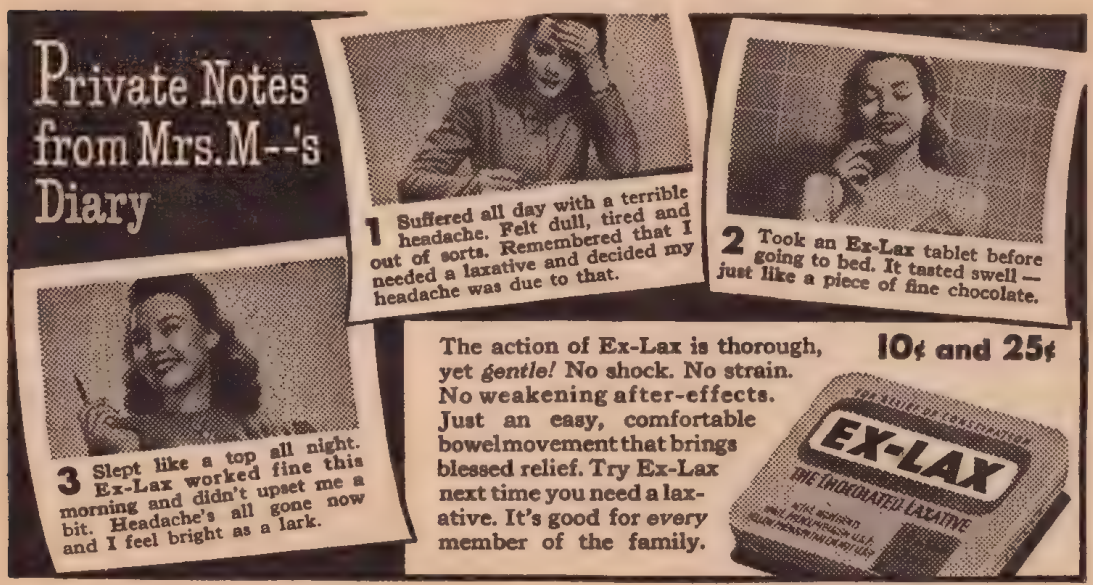
There was another whose lidded eyes watched as coldly as though this were a game of stud poker. If the hole card Doc Breaker shortly uncovered was a death verdict, Bill knew that Barney Sloane would be the first to talk trouble. The saloon man brought the odor of cigars and brandy on his natty gray broadcloth suit. A brown mustache fringed his long upper lip. His crooked Italian cheroot was cocked upward, and the gray-green eyes wandered up and down the room.

It was a standing jest in Frijole Flat that Kingbolt was on the skids and Barney Sloane was selling them the grease. In these months when there was not enough water to make a crop of grass, Scotty Hallett and his neighbors had to bring it in. They had to pay the Phoenix farmers a good price for it. If Scotty lacked the cash, Barney Sloane was never short.

Time was a thread that spun through the waiting men's minds. It seemed it would never snap. Breaker had finished setting the leg and clipped the hair on the back of the girl's head. The lesion was deep. A little moan came from Jeanie's lips when strong antiseptic was poured into the wound.

Swift hope yanked Bill Bronc and Scotty Hallett up on their feet. Breaker scowled them back. "Nothing to get excited about."

As they sat down again the thump of boots sounded on the front porch. An indistinct murmur, shot through with occasional higher voices, seeped through the closed door.


Private Notes from Mrs. M--'s Diary
1 Suffered all day with a terrible headache. Felt dull, tired and out of sorts. Remembered that I needed a laxative and decided my headache was due to that.
2 Took an Ex-Lax tablet before going to bed. It tasted swell — just like a piece of fine chocolate.
3 Slept like a top all night. Ex-Lax worked fine this morning and didn't upset me a bit. Headache's all gone now and I feel bright as a lark.
The action of Ex-Lax is thorough, yet *gentle!* No shock. No strain. No weakening after-effects. Just an easy, comfortable bowelmovement that brings blessed relief. Try Ex-Lax next time you need a laxative. It's good for *every* member of the family.
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Doc dropped his scalpel in the streaming pan. He hurried from the kitchen. A door opened, and the angry clamor came full-throated.

"All right, you hoodlums!" Breaker's shouted words got instant respect and a lull fell. "What's the idea of a mass meeting in my front yard?"

"Send that squatter out here!" The voice, with its snarled east Texas vowels, brought Bill the picture of a slouching, loose-coupled man wearing low-slung forty-fives. Dode Benton shot trouble for Barney Sloane down at the Territory House. Texas white-trash, Frijole Flat called him. He wore a puncher's rig, but the hardest work he'd ever done was to bury his drygulched dead.

"There's a girl in there maybe dying," Doc rasped, "and you come howlin' for a man to lynch!"

"No damn' Frijole Flatter's going to kill a Kingbolt girl and live to brag on it!" Benton retorted. "Don't try to stop us, Doc! We're comin' after him!"

SPURRED boots clanked across the gallery. They dragged to an abrupt halt. Doc's voice had a wicked snarl.

"Yep, and she's loaded! Keep it around to kill snakes, Benton. Your rattles'd look plumb handsome on the end of my watch chain. Don't get to coilin' where I can see you. While Bill Bronc's in my house he's under my care—you understand? If any man crosses this threshold, I'll kill him. And you can cut out your whoopin' and hollerin'. I like it quiet when I'm working."

Silence came after the door slammed and the lock scraped. But Bill knew they were still out there, stewing in the juice of their hatred.

So for another thirty minutes Doc worked with all the tools he possessed. His set features revealed nothing. Finally he bound Jeanie's head with gauze and called Scotty and Paso and Bill.

"She'll have to stay here. Give me a hand with the table."

Using it as a stretcher, they carried her into a rear bedroom and Ma Breaker came with a clean white nightgown. She shooed the men out of the room. In the narrow, dim-lit hallway, the doctor faced them.

"It doesn't look good, Scotty. All we can do is wait."

Scotty nodded, dumbly resigned now, no words coming to express his grief.

"How long, Doc?" Bill's voice sounded a mile away to him.

"Twelve hours . . . twenty-four hours. I don't know."

From the shadows, Barney Sloane drawled: "What do you care, Bronc? You won't be around."

"Cut that out, Sloane!" Doc's eyes swerved. Sloane blew a cloud of smoke between them. Intense distaste deepened the brackets at the sides of Breaker's lips. After a moment he turned to the silent Rafter H owner.

"My sympathy is all with you, Scotty. But let's get this one little angle out where it'll show. You're as much to blame for what's happened as Bill Bronc. You could have let these youngsters marry and pull out of a war they never started. It's you and Hass Colley—and our friend Sloane, here—who've fired the big guns in this battle. It's not fair to blame Bill."

To Bill, the frigid reception of his plea was no surprise. Doc found no response of any kind on Hallett's bearded face. His gaze swivelled to Paso Anson, and that loyal ramrod was as Indian-faced as ever. The silence tightened, then finally Scotty stirred.

"We'll go out the back way," he murmured.

He moved off, his broad shoulders blocking the hall. Barney Sloane knocked the ash from his cigar and fell in behind them. At the door, Scotty stood stiffly, looking back at Bill.

"Comin'?"

Doc caught a breath. "Listen, Scotty—no rough stuff—?"

"No rough stuff, Doc."

Bill's heart thudded as he moved to follow.

An alley flanked Doc's house on the rear. Across it bulked his small carriage shed and a corral. Scotty was a tall shadow between Paso Anson and Sloane, standing back against the small adobe building.

Bill was acutely conscious of the grind of his boot-soles on the gritty steps; the rattling of his spur-rowels over the risers. He was in the muffling dust of the alley, then, and pushing through a wall of hatred that was tough and clinging. A black shadow hung from the brim of Scotty's hat, masking his face.

Bill stopped. "Well, Scotty?"

From Scotty Hallett's side, without warning, orange flame spurted.

CHAPTER THREE

Hell's Saddle Legion

IT WAS as if a blacksmith had swung a sledge against Bill's hip-bone. The slug's force smashed him halfway around. But the thought sprang to Bill, even before the second shot burst loose, that he hadn't been hurt. The shock was comparable to running into the edge of a heavy table. Standing sideways as he was, Bill felt the second slug zoom past.

Instinct whipped his hand down at his own gun. What his palm encountered was a ragged chunk of wood and steel.

Barney Sloane was rushing in to finish the job Scotty's jumpy nerves had bungled. A derringer's blue snout poked out through the second and third fingers of his right hand. There was the wicked flash of white teeth in his dark face. Bill Bronc leaped.

His fingers, trapping the saloon man's wrist, strangled the accuracy of the shot. Then he slugged him on the jaw, a hard, bruising blow that snapped his head against the adobe wall. Sagging, Sloane emptied the other barrel.

Knuckles exploded on the point of his cleft chin. His teeth rattled like dice in a box. He was going down when Bill swung to meet Scotty Hallett, rushing upon him from the side.

Fearful of hitting the gambler, Hallett had raised his gun to hand-axe the canyon man. Bill caught his arm on the way down. His back muscles stretched and strained clear to the waist. Bill Bronc scraped five-eleven, but the cattle king towered inches taller. For all his sixty years, he was as tough as a bull buffalo.

A moment they swayed together. The scrape of Hallett's beard against Bill's face was like a harness brush.

A shadow slipped in behind him, and Bill Bronc's ears caught the slight snort of a man attacking.

Bill's left hand pistoned in a short, hard punch. Scotty grunted. His stomach muscles were like a washboard against Bronc's fist. Still the blow took his wind. Bill felt the strength ooze from the arm he was struggling against. Abruptly, he dropped away, twisting about as he came against the barn wall.

Anson's hairpin body slewed to follow him. He lashed out with his gun. Bill's fist drove straight in. He took the foreman over the heart and spilled him to the dirt. Anson's gun lay beyond lax fingers, and Bill bent and grabbed it up.

Whistling low, the gun-barrel glinted as he pivoted and swung it against the side of Scotty Hallett's head. Scotty went back against the corral poles. For a moment his elbows hung him there, blood sopping through his thick beard. His eyes rolled whitely upward. With a soft flopping sound, his body hit the ground.

A rising roar beat around the corner of the house. With it came fear that spattered icily against Bill's heart. Shouting men were crashing through the shrubbery.

Doc rushed through the back door with his gun gripped in his fist.

Bill had not thought the blow that felled Anson was a knockout punch, but the foreman lay crumpled where he had fallen. Doc's voice shook him.

"Scotty! Dammit man, you promised me— I ought to gun you where you stand!"

"It's me!" Bill called hastily. "I'm takin' one of your horses. Pay you back sometime, Doc!"

He darted into the warm, pungent blackness of the barn, found the gray in its stall. He fought the bit into its mouth and yanked the bridle into place. Doc Breaker's low, chopped tones followed him as he ran the horse to the rear door.

"Bill! You know that dead cottonwood above Scotty's bridge? I'll hang a red horse-blanket in it if she doesn't pull through. If you see it, leave this hole and don't ever come back. There'll be nothing to hold you."

In Bill's throat there was a burning, choking pain that he couldn't fight down. He wanted to thank Doc. To tell him what it meant to have one understanding friend in a friendless world. But right then that world was exploding under him and he could only spur the gray across the corral and wave to Doc as he took it over the fence.

In his wake a great roar erupted, a many-voiced bellow torn ragged with the explosions of short guns. Singing lead outran him to the mott of creosote for which he was spurring. Now a Winchester was laid across the top rail of the corral and a clear eye aimed and fired without pause.

Bill Bronc lay flat along the gray's neck. Riding slick, he was in danger of being unseated and left on foot to the will of the mob. He heard the recurrent whine of rifle slugs at steady intervals.

Then branches crackled under the horse's hoofs. Bill winced from the thrashing of brush against his face.

Behind him, tangled branches meshed to form a screen. Behind, gunfire rippled into the night. . . .

BILL stopped under the rimrock cliff at the head of Devil's Canyon and stood by the head of his lathered mare. He stopped there because he had to. He couldn't go on forever, galloping into the night and trying to outrace his fears and misery. Sometime he had to reason this out.

A man can be hit in the head by a gunbutt and maybe still think after a fashion. But hit him in the heart where it hurts, and he's no good. It was that way with Bill Bronc.

He hurt so bad he couldn't cry, but his whole body cried. The one thing he valued in this world was dying. Something inside Bill was slowly dying, too.

He'd been the kind of an idealistic damn' fool who believed in the fundamental good of human nature. Take it by and large, men were usually peace-loving and kind.

Peace-loving! Kind! A pack of blood-lusting wolves would have shown him the same mercy as Kingbolt had tonight.

And then the smoke of Bill's bitter-burning thoughts blew in other directions and turned him dumb and sour with memories and regrets. He thought of the Grange getting out of control and under the influence of rabble-rousing, liquor-peddling Hass Colley. He thought of Barney Sloane parading around in his store-bought clothes and boiled shirt, licking up the cream. . . .

Two loudmouths, and both saloon-keepers. Buying power with popping corks. Bill wondered how it would be on that day when Colley and Sloane tangled.

Bill might have stayed there an hour. Maybe two hours. But after awhile he saw something that made his thoughts blow up. Men were topping the mesa rim and striking for the hills, zig-zagging

through the gully-riven slope-land, but always bearing on towards Devil's Canyon.

A sob surged up in Bill's throat. Grief bore down on him crushingly.

"Oh, God!" he whispered. *"She—she ain't dead. You couldn't let her die—"*

Couldn't? Logic was a steel splinter skewering his insides. Jeanie was dead, and Scotty Hallett was riding for vengeance. Riding to blast Frijole Flat off the map.

The thing for Bill to have done was to ride away and never come back. Yet he was held by a powerful tie. It would be a massacre if the Grangers weren't warned. Nor would he ever believe Jeanie was dead until he had proof. A picture struggled to imprint itself on his mind. Bill set his teeth and slammed the spurs home. He'd see that red blanket the rest of his life. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Gun-Boss of the Devil's Grangers

BILL wound up the trail at a strong run. The canyon walls were vertical palisades of rimrock that piled up like stacks of giant planks. After a while the walls fell away on both sides. He was in a narrow, sloping valley down which the Ysleta cut lazy coils.

Here the trail became a road crossing tilled fields. The musty smell of irrigation ditches burdened the air. Rich, fertile soil, germinated by ample water, covered the wide canyon floor. High stands of tomatoes and beans, alfalfa, black-eyed peas and sweet potatoes, were coming to maturity.

Bare in its stark utility, Frijole Flat lay darkly in a sheltering elbow of the creek. Built of the only material the country afforded—adobe—the town was an ugly scab on the valley's surface. But it served the nesters' purpose. Barber shop, general store, feed and fuel outfit—the few things they must buy, they could obtain here.

For lighter moments, there was Hass Colley's Apache Bar. A midnight crowd jammed the place as Bill lit down and crossed the dirt sidewalk in a stride.

For the space of a dozen breaths he was standing in the doorway, searching through the crowd with a hard glance. From where he stood, he could see the difference in the town since Colley had taken over.

There were five or six gambling layouts running, cheap barrel-head games that were a heavy drain on the slim purses of the nesters. Colley had tripled his stock of hard liquor and put on a new barman. He'd brought in an epileptic piano and imported some girls from Tombstone. The piano was banging away and the crude stomp of trail boots shook every plank in the floor. Through it all was the guffawing laughter of half-drunken men and the brittle music of girl's voices. Bill saw men who should have been home with their families: Lee Cole, Tom Brush, Johnny Carlin—

These days, Frijole Flat played hard. The hoe-men laughed more, but they smiled less.

Bill Bronc suddenly roared: "Colley!"

The noise ended on a crash from the piano. Hass Colley stepped back a pace from the end of the bar, his hat on the back of his head, shaggy red hair crowding from under the sweat-band. He was a muscular chunk of a man. Wide enough through the shoulders for a six-footer, he was inches short of that. His mouth was equally out of proportion; and it spilled plenty talk in Frijole Flat, Bill was thinking. He had a schooner of beer in his grasp and foam on his lips.

"You don't have to yell, Bronc," he cracked out. "I ain't deef. Seems like you were dam' scarce at Grange meetin' tonight!" Colley grabbed the initiative while his quick, bright eyes studied the other for his intentions.

"'Low it didn't fret you none," Bill gave back. Hostile gazes whipped resentment alive within him. He'd come here for no pleasure of his own, and he aimed to take no sass.

Tom Brush stared across a whiskey glass balanced neatly in three fingers of his right hand. "Reckoned you didn't figger on coming back," he dropped casually. "Hosses were turned out when I rode by and no sign of life around the place. Somethin' change your mind?" Brush was a rangy hoe-man of sixty, baldheaded and with a lazy way about him. He'd been Bill's nearest neighbor and a good friend to him in those early days.

Bill Bronc startled them all by thrusting a granger from his place at the varnished pine and uncorking the bar-bottle. He downed a hair-raiser and flung the bottle against the unplastered adobe wall.

"I didn't come here to put myself on trial," he snapped. His voice had a contemptuous sting to it that backed the distaste in his deep-set gray eyes. "I don't give four-bits worth of last year's turnips what any of you think of me, and I guess you savvy my opinion of you. But just so you won't go off at half-cock when the Kingbolt crowd gets here—"

Hass Colley started, foam sloshing from his glass over the front of his shirt. "Kingbolt—! You full of corn, Bronc? That ain't on the level—?

Bill said coldly: "Will you keep your big mouth shut till I finish? Me an' Jeanie Hallett tried to elope tonight. The wagon turned over on us in Sweetwater Wash and Jeanie's hurt bad. The doc doesn't know if she'll live. Maybe she's already gone, because Scotty Hallett's bringin' the cow-crowd up the canyon right now."

You could hear a gasp go through the room like a gust of wind. Colley's horsey red features seemed to go blank. Then he came to life with a shouted curse, and a yank of energy that sent the beer mug into a corner.

"A hell of a time to tell us—! Douse the lights. Any of you that ain't wearing guns, I've got extras in back."

HE HELD still through a brief instant, poised on his stubby legs, glancing this way and that as he considered the possibilities of the room as a fortress.

"This joint's a rat trap!" his decision came through the deepening dusk. "We've got to spread. Four or five men to every building along the street."

"What's your plan?" Bill Bronc had come close to him.

"Smear 'em!" the Grange boss snarled. "If any man rides back to Kingbolt, it'll be because somebody didn't aim careful enough. Douse those lights, I said!"

"Oh, no!" said Bill. "They're all going to ride back, Colley. Sloane's got 'em drunk, or they wouldn't be trying such a damfool trick. What you're going to do is let them ride into town, then fire a warning shot and tell Scotty they haven't got a chance. He'll be sober enough to realize he's in a trap."

"When did you begin mapping our fights?" Colley's voice was an audible sneer.

The last lamp sent up a ring of soot. Darkness came like black smoke rising from the floor. Through it Bill reached to jab Colley's stomach with the barrel of his six-shooter.

"A mad dog like you needs a strong leash," he whispered. "This is mine." Only the saloon man could hear the gritty sound of his voice. "Tell 'em to go on as planned, but not to fire a shot unless you give the order. Make it sound like you mean it. This gun will go off the first time one of them cracks a cap."

Hass Colley's flat belly shrank from the bite of the gun's cold barrel. A second he was silent; then: "Wait a minute, boys. No gun-stuff unless I give the order. I've changed my mind. Savvy?"

A rumbling murmur answered him. The

barroom began to empty. As the last tramping boot fled, the sound of hoofbeats swelled through the town. Bill drove the gun deep.

"Mosey up front, slow-like. . . ."

By the time shod hoofs cut the dirt of Frijole Flat's one street, the town was like a somnolent, coiled rattler. Behind each window trembled a nervous trigger-finger. Scotty Hallett pulled up in front of the Apache, riding high and mighty on a big bay. Twenty Rafter H riders and Kingbolt cowmen ground down behind him. Hand aloft, Hallett let a slow gaze quest through the dirty windows, then stared on down the street.

"Town's dead, dammit!" he called back. "And there ain't two dozen live here."

Milt Cassiday's high tones shrilled: "Nothin' to stop us firin' up the stores before we push along—"

"Nothin' but forty Winchesters, cow-nurses!" A slug cracked spitefully above Scotty's head and screamed off an adobe wall.

A CHARGE of grape-shot might have produced a similar milling of horses and yelling of startled men. The punchers were fighting wheeling ponies and peering about for the hidden army. Bill Bronc kept his gun snug against Colley's ribs as the gambler yelled again.

"We'll empty every saddle in sight, less'n we see the hind ends of your broncs pronto! Don't try this'n again, Hallett."

The men out there were cold sober now. They were edging their mounts back. Their hands stayed shy of gun-steel.

Scotty Hallett couldn't keep the disappointment from his voice. "We'll be back, Colley. If my daughter dies, God Himself won't be able to save you! You've won one hand; not the whole game."

His admission of failure marked the way for a fumbling, ignoble retreat. The

You glide through whiskers like a breeze—
And find new comfort, speed and ease
With Thin Gillettes, priced four for ten;
They rate sky-high with thrifty men!
Top quality at rock-bottom price
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The Thin Gillette Blade Is Produced By The Maker Of The Famous Gillette Blue Blade

dark, silent windows watched them wheel. A moment after, they were loping out of town.

The squatters gave them a full minute. Then they came trooping back to the saloon.

Bill was mulling Scotty's words over and over: *"If* my daughter dies—!" Then Doc was still on the job!

Hass Colley's thumb-nail cracked the head of a match. He lighted a wall-lamp and planted it on the sticky bar, where it glared on Bill Bronc's sweaty, drawn features, emphasizing the white adhesive on his broken nose.

"All right, mister—talk! Seeing eye-to-eye with the cow-crowd nowadays, ain't you—makin' me checkrein the boys?" Colley leaned against the bar by his two elbows, pistol jutting forward.

Bill's gaze frowned over the ring of curious, hostile faces forming about him. "There wasn't any call for gunplay," he retorted. "You and your pistol are too damn' quick to talk. We've stalled war off this much longer by snubbing them down tonight."

"Stalled it off! You talk like a Quaker preacher! We could have tromped them rats into their holes tonight!"

"Not all of them. Some would have lived to organize a revenge crew against us. Tonight would only have been the opening shot in the bloodiest war Arizona's ever seen. You know, Colley, sometimes I think you want war mighty dam' bad for a gent that don't stand to profit by it. Whose axe are you grinding?"

Colley blanched under the accusation. Then he came stiffly erect and his words snapped like bullets.

"I say this bronc-stomper needs a neck-stretchin'!" I say he's going to get it tonight! Brush—get his gun. . . ."

Tom Brush shifted uneasily, scratching an imaginary itch. Johnny Carlin and Lee Cole and the rest avoided Bill's steady scrutiny.

"This don't call for no hangin'," Brush cleared his throat. "Better to just run him out of the canyon."

"Why, you milk-fed greenhorns—! Let him out of your sight and he'll be leadin' the pack against us."

Young Johnny Carlin gruffed: "We've been warned now and we'll be ready next time. Reckon you'd better ride, Bronc. Looks like you've been read out of the party." His eyes were not friendly; neither were they savage, like Colley's.

Bill Bronc backed until the feel of the slatted door was against his shoulder blades. He smiled, right into the barrel of the gun Hass Colley dared not fire.

"Draw to another busted flush, amigo? Maybe you're waterin' your likker too heavy these days. Fill 'em with enough rotgut and you'll get that war yet."

The batwings flapped mockingly after him. From the night came the plumping of his horse's hoofs in the heavy dust. Colley jammed down the rage that reared wildly in him. He set out a new bar bottle with a hand shaken by anger.

"A parting toast to our ex-leader, gents! May he share a wormy grave with Scotty Hallett!"

The Grangers drank without enthusiasm. Neither the liquor nor the toast pegged at ninety proof.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bushwhack Pardners

THE morning sun was high before Kingbolt awoke. Men slept on hard beds of defeat that night.

From the dry barranca where he had bedded out on the mesa, Bill Bronc rose early to watch a dead cottonwood near Scotty's crossing. Its dead branches were still bare.

Bill smoked a cigarette for breakfast. His stomach was a sour, hurting emptiness. Each nerve was a hot wire that

stretched and twisted of its own accord.

Every horsebacker who passed within a mile of the cottonwood caused Bill to jump into a tense crouch, his eyes staring haggardly.

There was a hard shell of stolidness with which a man could toughen himself at times like this. Bill had heard about it. It was a good trick, but he couldn't do it.

From the first, he'd known the town would pull him in like a calf on a rope. Eleven o'clock saw him riding toward Kingbolt at a high lope. It made no difference that almost every man in town would be gunning for him. He was going to find out about Jeanie.

From the shelter of the brush, his eyes made quick, nervous flicks through the corral and alley. His gun lay in his lap as he advanced at a walk to the barn. He stalled the gray, leaving her saddled.

He paused a moment at the barn door, then took four running steps. He was reaching for the handle of Doc Breaker's screen door when voices arrested him and he sank back down in the shrubbery.

"I won't try to thank you, Doc. They don't make words for a time like this. You've given me back the only think I give a damn for in this life." Scotty's voice was husky.

"You'll have her home with you in two days." Doc Breaker said. Stiffness dwelt in his tones and he paused. "By the way—didn't we have some kind of an agreement last night?"

"You mean—young Bronc? You've got a kick comin', I reckon. Plumb lost my head."

"And then afterwards, when you tried to eradicate Frijole Flat to get even with him."

"Getting even, Doc, was only part of it. Where we were really headin' was for the dam! I had dynamite in my saddle bags."

"Dynamite! For the love of Mike, Scotty—!"

"Aw, don't go it too heavy." Scotty sounded like a guilty schoolboy. "Sloane sold me the idea. Says he's through backing us for hay unless we show more fight."

"But what good would dynamiting do? The water would be wasted. You're burned out this summer anyway. Nothing to do but weather it the best you can and build your own dam, like Bill Bronc's told you all along."

"We've got to have hay before then. We'll be starved out."

"Well, sell some cattle. Raise money on your land. The Phoenix banks ain't busted."

"I am, Doc! I couldn't sell a cow if I tried. Sloane took the Rafter H for a quarter interest in last night's game. He was already into me for a quarter of it on loans. I've got me a pardner now."

Doc Breaker rasped finally: "Hallett, you're a bigger fool than I thought you were! You licked the Indians, and now you're toadying to a two-bit, tinhorn, saloon keeper!"

"Don't be too sure I'm toadying!" Scotty flared. "Without Sloane's help we're sunk. Stick around. I'll be back on the top of the heap before I'm through!"

There was the thud of his boots retreating down the hall. The front door slammed.

DOC had his hand on the knob of Jeanie's door when he saw the wedge-shouldered figure limned by the sunlight at the end of the hall. He flung himself back against the wall, fumbling for the gun stuck under his belt. These days not even a sawbones was safe.

"Doc! Bronc talkin'—"

"*You,* Bill! Haven't you got the sense you were foaled with? This town's crawling with men after your scalp. A thousand dollars of Barney Sloane's money rides with you."

Through the panels at Breaker's side a

thin cry intruded: *"Bill!* Doctor, is that Bill?"

Bill came down the hall in long, spur-clanking strides. He thought his heart would bust loose from its cage. He was grinning like a fool. At the door, Doc managed to stop him an instant.

"Easy does it, pardner! She's doing right pert, but there ain't too be any unduly—"

Bill's big hands put him out of the way. He stopped inside the door, arms dangling. Jeanie was trying to sit up in bed, very small and very pale in a nightgown big enough for three of her. A narrow white bandage showed like a ribbon in her gold curls. She gave a little muffled sob as Bill, on his knees beside the bed, buried his face against her breast.

Doc Breaker was a man who understood his fellow-beings. He closed the door and, whistling softly, went to stand a while in the shade of the gallery. He gave them fifteen minutes by his watch. Then he returned to scowl at the bronc-snapper who by now was sitting on the edge of the bed holding both of Jeanie's hands.

"Son, I ain't a man to throw an orphan out in the snow," he preambled. "At the same time—"

Bill got up wearily: "I know. They'll be watching the place."

"Doctor, how long before I can walk again?" Jeanie's eyes were glistening. "We're going again as soon as I'm up. But this time we're going to ride!"

Bill shook his head slowly. "I've learned this lesson the tough way. You can't lick a problem by shirking it. There's a bet even Barney Sloane's overlooked, and I'm putting my chips back of it today."

"What are you going to do?" Jeanie watched him move toward the door.

"Turn myself in for that bounty," Bill grinned, and went out the door.

Doc caught him short of the screen door. "What *are* you going to do, Bill? You know what it means to stay in town."

Bill's thumb thoughtfully cocked and un-cocked the old Frontier he had taken from Paso Anson. "All this time I've been blaming Scotty Hallett for bein' pig-headed, and now I think Sloane's fostered the whole ruckus. Sloane and Colley. We'd have talked turkey a long time back, but for them. Now, if Sloane was out of the way—"

"They'd hang you for that, Bill!"

I won't kill him unless I'm crowded. I'm going to give him a chance to leave town—with me. So far away he'll never come back. He's yellow enough that a good scare would stick with him."

"You'll never reach the saloon alive! Kingbolt's wild to take your hair!"

I'll swing around by Mesa Street. I think I can reach the back of the Territory that way."

The doctor shook his head. "You won't make it. But if you're dead set on trying, I'll go this far with you. Mike Mooney's laid up with the grippe and he won't be at his blacksmith shop. I'll leave a horse for you in his back corral. That's on Mesa, you know."

Bill poised on the sill. "Make that two horses, will you? I hope to be ridin' with a friend!"

Bill quartered wide, and rode through a huddle of thatched Mexican *jacales* and ocotillo goat-pens. Here and there, where workmen had excavated for adobe, the ground was pitted with shallow holes. Twice Bill had to lie doggo at the bottom of one until Rafter H riders loped past. His stealth doubled as the two-story bulk of the Territory House loomed before him. Doc had already come with the horses and left.

A shell of hardness completely enclosed Bill now. The time for caution was past.

AN OUTSIDE stairway mounted to the second story. Bill skirted a ground-tied horse and ran up the steps. Stalking

inside, he stood in a dim hallway. Beyond the hall he could see the pickets of a balcony balustrade. Barney Sloane maintained an office in the middle of the balcony. Bill knew that, and the knowledge brought him unwillingly into the wide, bare run of the balcony, in plain view of the saloon.

He looked down on the lazy noonday functions of the house. A dozen customers lounged against the red mahogany bar. The roulette layout was still canvas-shrouded, but the clacking of dice came from a corner table, and a stud dealer flicked gleaming pasteboards across green baize.

Gun hanging heavy in his grip, Bill slid down the wall. A voice reached out to him, and the sound he heard was his name. It was Sloane talking.

"I don't know why in hell you didn't gun him while you could. That kind's always safer dead."

"If I'd of shot Bronc last night, them squatters would have lynched me! They've got a sneakin' respect for him that it ain't safe to play with. They're gettin' too peace-lovin' for my notions. I have to keep 'em half-drunk to get any place a-tall."

Bill's bewildered senses followed dully the strain of Hass Colley's grousing. All the chips he had so painstakingly stacked in his mind had been scattered by that voice.

Colley and Sloane—*partners!*

Colley taking orders from this sallow-eyed gambler he had raged against. Barney Sloane discussing with the leader of the despised hoe-men how to bring both the Grange and the cattle outfits to their knees. Now Bill understood exactly how it was.

Sloane was a grand-scale cock-fighter. His money kept knives on Scotty Hallett's spurs, and Colley's work armed and enraged the Devil's Canyon crowd. He had thrown the ranchers and the hoe-men into the pit together and pretty soon the bright blood would flow.

There was no longer the slightest chance for peace. Bill understood that now, while he listened to those hateful voices. Dode Benton was in there too; now and then he grunted something.

"Bill Bronc's doin' us no good running around loose," Sloane muttered. Bill's mind mirrored him in his favorite pose; slumped in his chair, caressing his small mustache with the back of a forefinger. "Sometime he's going to pin Hallett down and make him listen to reason. It'll be Johnny-grab-your-britches then."

"They'll never be another time like right now. I can't keep them squatters at fighting pitch forever."

"All right." Sloane grunted the words and was silent a moment. "How about tonight?"

"Won't come a better time."

"We can work it like this. Tell your plow-chasers you've heard Hallett's going to blast the dam tonight. You picked it up while you were pussyfooting around here today, *sabe?* He'll have his bunch in that fort of his until midnight. That big, strong castle nobody's ever crashed yet. But a little article Mr. Hercules manufactures in sticks might do the trick."

"Dynamite!" grunted Dode Benton. "That's the ticket."

"That takes care of Hallett, but what about my crowd?" Colley objected.

"I've got ideas for them too. There's leaks right in Hallett's personal army. Tobe Leathers and Charley Cole are with me. Then there's four or five of Scotty's punchers—Joe Rush, Pinto Burke. . . ." He tolled them off. "They won't exactly fancy bein' inside when you pitch the dynamite in the window. So I'll stake them in the brush outside. I'll tell Hallett I've got a tip you're going to attack. After the fun starts, the boys will cut down on the Grangers from the back. Good idea if you sort of hang back, feller—"

Bill Bronc smiled viciously. Then with grim recklessness, he seized the doorknob, turned it. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

Roll Call in Hell

A SHOUT echoed wildly through the saloon, and he froze.

"Gawdamighty! Look yonder—!

A bar-lounger had spotted him and was pointing him out. A chair clattered in Sloane's office. A man at the craps table leaped up to fire at him, and Bill whirled and drove a slug into his arm.

Bill's chance was lost. That certainty jarred home with the rush of boots for the door, the pound of men's feet up the stairway. He sprinted back the way he had come.

He heard the door slam back against the wall as he reached the corner. Someone fired, yelling his name after him.

Gaining the door at the hall's end, Bill turned back. The consciousness of how little time he had, made his words ring like dropped coins.

"I'll kill the first man around the corner!" he warned.

The running feet came on without slowing. Bill said a prayer, even as his trigger moved, that the body this bullet tore would be Barney Sloane's—

But it was Dode Benton who lunged, firing wildly, into the red wash of Bill Bronc's lead. Benton came stiffly up on his toes. His guns clattered on the loose planks. Blood spattered his pony-skin vest as he clutched his chest.

Bill heard his body strike the floor, but he was four steps down the stairway when the sound came to him. At the bottom, he threw the reins of the ground-tied pony standing there over its head. A whack on its rump sent it pounding up the alley. He crouched on his heels beneath the stairs.

The door banged open; Sloane yelled: "Headin' for Main Street! Tell 'em out in front! Five thousand for him, dead or alive!"

In the thirty seconds grace Bill gained, he crossed that deadly hundred yards of bare ground, grabbed one of the horses behind Mooney's smithy.

He was pounding down the bosky long before pursuit turned that way. Later, he came out and jogged slowly into the ragged fringe of the Rafter H herd. He was manifestly riding herd when a pair of bounty hunters climbed from the bosky and approached him.

Bill made trail-herd signals with his hat. "Thataway!" he bawled.

The riders waved their thanks and galloped on down the river-bed.

It took the dark safety of night to slacken the tension of his muscles. Even then he could not fully relax.

The emptiness of his stomach hurt terribly. Yet it gave him something to fight against; a toehold for courage.

Bill lay on his back and smoked, watching the moon plow through the stars. And after a while, when he knew the hour was very near, the calmness he needed came to him. . . .

ABOUT that same time, tension was riding Scotty Hallett hard. At Sloane's advice he had kept all the lights burning. Darkness might warn the Grange. But it was more than his personal danger that rowelled Hallett.

"Why do we need Leathers and them skulkin' in the brush?" he fumed. "This is backshootin'—I don't like it. I can whip 'em up, and down, and sideways."

Beside the window, Sloane stood very stiff and very natty in his gray broadcloth finery. He had his back to Hallett.

"Maybe you'd like to wear a target over your heart and even it up still more. Don't forget, Hallett, they're planning to backshoot the hell out of us tonight."

Scotty's protests grumbled away into silence. Paso Anson sat sucking gloomily on a quirly. Then a hissed warning from the gambler electrified the room.

"There's the signal! Ready with the lights. Soon as they're inside the trap—"

A moment later they could hear stealthy boots in the loose leaves among the cottonwoods. The canyon men were coming on foot. A cry slashed across the silence.

"Copperin' your bet, Hallett! Come out or git shot out!"

A lamp crashed blazing from the darkening fortress, and Scotty Hallett's bellow rolled after it.

"Make your play, gents. Sky's the limit!"

Yet not a shot exploded.

Waves of restlessness rippled over the ranchyard. On the part of Scotty's crowd, there was an unwillingness to fire the opening shot. With the nesters it was the same. Leathers' little bunch in the dark shadow-pools of the well and woodpile could not risk betraying their position to the Grangers.

Into that silence there rode the lonely clop-clop of shod hoofs. A rider moved briskly into the clearing.

He stopped, sat silent. When Scotty could stand the suspense no longer, he called out:

"Stranger, you're settin' on a bar'l of black powder. Move along!"

"Not until I've spoke my lines," Bill Bronc said.

Scotty's low-pitched growl came back after a second. "Your nose is right on the end of my gun-bar'l, Bronc. Any reason why I shouldn't trigger?"

"Lot's of 'em. The biggest one being that Sloane wants you to. Pretty soon there'll come a stick of dynamite through that window and you won't care no more who owns Rafter H. That'll be his idea, too."

"Figger on throwin' that dynamite yourself, Bronc?" Scotty inquired acidly.

"Nope; Hass Colley will do it. Or maybe even Tobe Leathers!"

That dragged a curse from Scotty. "You're drunk! Leathers is a Kingbolt man—"

"Kingbolt or not, he's a Sloane man—and that doesn't mean his guns are yours! Wake up, Scotty—and you fool hoe-men, too! Barney Sloane's playing you against each other. You're both going to lose."

SCOTTY HALLETT'S voice had a little, puzzled quaver. "You think I'm crazy, Bill Bronc? Sloane's backin' me to win—"

"Yes? Where do you think he is now?"

"Right here beside me. Sloane! *Sloane!* where the devil—!"

"Save your voice, Scotty!" Bill said. "Sloane's out here where the dynamite

won't touch him. He left as soon as the lights went out. . . ."

From the woodpile a gun roared. Bill felt a blinding shock, felt the ground strike him. He lay there, dizzy, sick.

"Scotty! Paso! Johnny! These are the ones you've got to get . . . Tobe Leathers, Charley Cole, Burke, Rush—"

They didn't let him finish that boothill roll-call. Lead was plowing the ground about him. Two more slugs cut him. Yet until his gun was empty he fired it in the direction from which that first shot had come; for it had come from Barney Sloane.

Scotty Hallett led the rush from the house. Paso Anson crowded out behind him. Another wave of men bulged from the trees. The two streams converged on the woodpile, well-sweep, and smithy, were Sloane's crowd was holed up.

Bill could not take part in the battle, but he could watch the attack that cut the renegades out and drove them at a run to the shelter of the barn. And he could hear the rattle of rifle-fire cutting them down, spilling them in awkward huddles. Then later someone was saying grimly:

"That cleans out *that* snake's hole. Plow-chasers, you and me have been pullin' somebody else's chestnuts out of the fire. God forgive us if the lad that opened our eyes has his closed for good—!"

And they came hurrying back to where Bill Bronc lay in a half-world of pain and swirling blackness. Scotty knelt in the dirt. Glum lines wreathed his eyes.

Bill's head raised a little. "Gimme—lift," he gasped. "Got to—sit up."

Scotty's great arm brought him upright. "Son," he groped. "Son, I ain't a feller to talk much, but—"

"Check it," Bill waved him off impatiently. "All of you set down here a minute. We're gonna draw up that truce right now, while you're all in a forgivin' mood. Best way to make it stick is to draw plans."

Tom Brush squatted beside Scotty. "What kind of plans?"

"For a new dam! One big enough for both of us. Less waste that way than havin' two dams." Bill's finger began to sketch shakily in the dirt. "Look here. That washout on Sweetwater Creek gave me an idea. There must be a tolerable run-off there in winter. We'll build far enough up to catch that too. . . ."

They were all studying the map he drew when suddenly he slumped forward. Scotty swore quietly and scooped him up, to carry him inside.

That was another of Doc Breaker's busy nights. Until sunup, he worked over Bill's wounds. But when four bloody lead pellets lay in a pan beside him, he announced that it was one of the neatest jobs of patchin' he'd ever done.

"He ain't to be moved for two weeks, though, you understand?" he warned Scotty. "Put him in a room where he'll have a lot of light and fresh air—if this fort's got such a thing. Like it or not, you've got a damn' squatter for a house guest."

* * *

Scotty liked it. He thought the idea was so good that he had Jeanie brought home and carried her cot into the same room. And because it wasn't decent that way, he fetched in a preacher and got them married.

That same day he put some Mexicans to work mixing 'dobe bricks for a new wing on the east end of his place. Room was found for additional corrals. As soon as they were done, he had Bill Bronc's mustangs brought down and penned them.

Scotty Hallett was moving the whole dam' horse ranch onto the place! He wanted first crack at those biscuit-cuttin' cow-horses Bill turned out, he said. Paso Anson claimed Scotty was just too all-fired stubborn to admit outright that any squatter was worth having around.

THE END

Death Waits for Runt Malone

By RALPH EMERSON KRUEGER

He didn't know how he'd gotten up in the saddle, but he guessed the rider must have carried him. . . .

"Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds." That was the creed of the Pony Express, but it took a Cheyenne arrow, a jug of Rawbone rum—and Runt Malone—to prove it!

EVER since Runt Malone had downed that bumper mug of border tequila he could have sworn there was a bag of desert sand inside of him, and cactus sticks stirring it around.

With the dust dripping from every lift of his heavy boots, Runt Malone was walking along the Butterfield Stage trail —walking to Wyoming!

Walking and swearing. Swearing at himself and swearing off liquor. When liquor reduced a man to walking it was time to swear off.

Behind him he could hear the clop of approaching horses, the jangle of chain traces, and the creak of the leather thoroughbraces on the north-bound stage. Now if old Nick Nicholas was up on the box—

As luck would have it, Nick was driving the stage. He slowed down enough so Runt could swing up alongside. But the tequila in the gaunt and hardy little Runt Malone told him not to trust his eyes.

He just stood there, swallowing the dust, his arm raised in a helpless gesture

toward the grab-iron as the stage rolled past and ground to a stop several lengths nearer Wyoming.

When Runt was sure that the stage was actually waiting for him, he waddled along the alkali trail, kicking up his own little cloud of dust.

Nick's shot-gun guard moved over to make room.

"Howdy, Runt!" the grizzled old driver shouted down. "Swing up—an' careful now. Uncommon forgettin' o' me not to pull a quicker halt. Mighta knowed you'd be packin' likker—in your pocket or down your gullet."

Runt had scarcely reached the box when the six-horse team braced forward against leather and the stage rolled on.

"Whar yuh headin'?" the driver asked.

"Back," was all Runt could get out between breaths. An oath would have been too much effort.

"Reckon that means back to the 'jackass mail'."

"Wish't it did," Runt said.

As a matter of fact Runt wasn't going anywhere in particular. Just north. Out of the tequila belt and into the whiskey country. But the driver's suggestion turned his mind back to the days when he'd ridden the "jackass mail" into hundreds of mining camps, watched the expressions on the faces of men desperately hungry for news of home and the outside world. That was life!

He'd poured in with the rush of the Forty Niners, but not for the gold. Gold was just yeller metal. It bought Rawbone rum, yes. But his thirst had never reached the point where it cost a mine full of gold to quench it. By the slap-damn horn-spoon—he'd get along without it from now on!

BACK there at the diggings they'd been glad to pay him a dollar and more for each letter he'd delivered from home. And he'd been making men happy to boot! He remembered that last time he'd traveled with Nick Nicholas, up in the Green River country in Wyoming, when he'd lost that fight with the jug of Rawbone rum—and then lost the jug as well.

He hadn't exactly *lost* it; but, still in all, he hadn't been able to find it either. Runt was going to remark about it, but then he decided he'd let Nick forget about that, and maybe some day, should he ever decide to take another drink, he'd look for it. In his slap-damn, jumpin', roarin', cussin', Billy-be-damned brand of vernacular, he opined, he'd *find* it, too!

"Runt!" Nick hollered around the shot-gun guard. "Jerk out'n that spell yuh got! You mind, Runt, how me an' you throwed in with them two trappers up on the Green River—"

So it was coming! Leave it to Nick to bring up the lost jug of Rawbone at a time like this!

Nick Nicholas chuckled and talked to his shot-gun guard. "Runt here, he said we don't dast go less'n we take likker for snake bites. So we each antes a five—fifteen dollars—an' we send Runt out to buy the grub an' some likker for rattler bites.

"Well sir, 'fore we know it, Runt's back, packin' a whole dollar's wuth o' crackers, an' *fourteen dollar's wuth o' snake bite likker!* Well sir, we all set around for a spell, tryin' to calc'late the number o' rattlers thereabouts, an' when we all agreed that no rattler ever come up that far, we commenced drinkin' an' talkin' till half the stuff was gone. Next time, Runt didn't buy the grub. We got our own, an' Runt, he had to pack whut was left o' the likker.

"He did, too. That is—long as he could. The payoff is, Runt gets tired an' chucks it inside a holler tree. Then comin' back, he can't find that holler tree! Far as I know, he never *did* find it."

"Never did!" said Runt quickly. That ended it, and if the snorts he let out had

been words, they would have been the pick of his cussing collection. "Nick, yuh got a drink?" he finished off. "This dust shore makes yuh thirsty."

"Not me," Nick said, and laughed. "Reckon you'll have to find that holler tree."

IT WAS a raw, biting, Wyoming wind that was scattering the snow through the pass at the foot of the Wind River mountains as Runt slogged along the Overland Trail. Grim-faced, head bent, he pushed on. When the wind blew too hard, he held his collar up tighter and when this made his fingers sting beyond feeling, he blew his breath over them, bent his head into the wind and pushed on a little faster.

Up ahead, that flickering yellow light in a cabin window might be a relay station. Or if he was in real luck, it would be a "home" station and there would be more room—and horses!

He was still trying to get someone to stake him to a horse. He wanted to put "Runt's Express" in operation again. Delivering those letters like he used to—riding into camp with "Runt's Express" painted on the saddle-bag to advertise his business, the handshakes and cheers of the miners—it all made him feel important to someone. More than ever, now, he wanted it back.

But since Russel, Majors and Waddell had organized that Pony Express, no one was interested in staking him.

For the first time in his life, Runt felt that he was no longer necessary to anyone. Now, younger couriers had taken his place. Yes, and some had said he was getting too old to carry the mail, even the "jackass mail" to mining camps.

So he was getting too old, was he! He'd show 'em! Why, he wasn't much more'n forty—well, not fifty yet, anyhow. And he could still ride as well as the next one. And fight! He hadn't had a fight in two weeks, but he reckoned it wouldn't be long before someone would refer to his lineage and the canine world in the same breath. Then he'd show 'em! . . .

MAYBE he *had* cussed too much in his life. Why, he'd cussed the best of them from St. Joe to Sacramento. But never had he cussed a friend in seriousness, nor had a lick of profanity ever been directed toward a horse. That's why he'd always had friends wherever a town moved with each whisper of "gold."

Right now, he was slogging along in silence. There was no one to cuss and he had no horse. With the snow blanketing everything, he wasn't even sure of where he was. He felt that if he kept on toward that yellow light, he'd maybe find a horse, warmth—and life!

But what if they wouldn't let him in! That's what had happened at the Green River station, twenty miles back. The division boss had left strict orders that only Overland employees and Pony riders were allowed in the station. Too many good horses had been spirited away—and they couldn't always blame the Injuns.

Runt Malone didn't find life. *He found death!*

It was right there before him. Cold, stiff, recent death!

Runt dropped one knee to the white-drifted trail edge, his eyes stabbing down at the body of a man. The strap of a four-pocketed leather saddle-cover was clutched in a stiffened hand. "U. S. MAIL" was lettered on each pocket.

A mochila! Runt recognized it at once. He'd seen those mail-bags before, spread over the saddle of Pony Express riders.

He turned the man over and saw that he was not a man; he was a youngster. A feathered shaft stuck out from his chest. But the kid still had the mail. Even in death he refused to surrender the mochila strap from his clutching fingers. Runt had to pry it loose. . . .

Again he was carrying the mail! Hugging it close in front of him, Runt raced the few steps more to the yellow light. Easing with caution along the roughly hewn wall of the cabin, he came to the window and looked inside.

Cold as he was, Runt could feel his blood growing colder at what he saw. There on the floor lay both attendants of the relay station, mute evidence of the fight they had lost to flashing scalp knives.

Runt's eyes strained back and forth as far as he could see. Then, as he watched, the pale yellow lamp flickered, then grew brighter for an instant, then dimmed again and died.

EXCEPT for the restless moan of the wind, a death-like quiet shrouded the pass. But for only an instant longer. Then came the snow-muffled clopping of fast pounding hoofs and the triple blare of a bugle. In the light of the white background to the east, Runt saw the silhouette of a rider hugging close to his pony's neck.

The rider jerked up and three more blasts from the bugle told Runt that the westbound mail was coming through. That was life! And once again Runt Maloney was a part of it.

In a spray of snow from the horse's hoofs, the rider slammed his mount back on its haunches and came to a halt in front of the door. He swung down, grabbed up his mochila from the saddle and slapped his sweated pony toward the stable.

"What're you waiting for?" called the rider. "Where's my fresh horse? Say—" the young rider stood staring at Runt—"who're you?"

"Runt Maloney. But never mind that! Station's been raided!"

Together they kicked open the door. The rider's hand dropped to his holster.

"We won't be needin' that," Runt said. "Get a match an' you'll see."

Runt found one first and struck it over the oil lamp. Once more the yellow flame flared and died. But the brief light was bright enough to reveal the note at its base.

The kid found a candle, lit it, and together they examined the note.

"Shorty Hawkins' name signed to it," the rider said quickly. "Say, who'd you say your name is?"

"Never mind! Read me the note!"

The rider read aloud: "Injuns got my horse. I will head west by short cut back to G. R. station. Pete, if you get through, we swap mail at Green R. Shorty Hawkins."

"Shorty Hawkins didn't get through," said Runt, shaking his head. "Got an arrer in him 'fore he reached that short cut over the hill."

With the mention of the arrow, both turned their gaze to the two scalped men on the floor. Their heads were still dripping red.

"You better take my horse," young Pete said slowly. "I'll walk. Anyhow, I'm younger'n you an' know my way."

Runt didn't like that inference to age. But here was the chance he'd been hunting for months. He could have a horse, a good horse. Not as good as a fresh horse, but it would be a Pony Express horse, and they didn't come any better. All he needed to do was to get on and ride; the kid would find his way back on foot. And hadn't the kid said he was young and knew his way?

The "home" station back east was closer than Green River. Young Pete wouldn't have so far to walk. He could double back over the trail he knew so well, be there in the morning if luck was with him. And Runt could ride the Overland trail, aboard a fleet horse. He wouldn't have to risk the short cut over the hill on foot. But the kid had inferred that age made a difference!

Not here, it didn't! He'd show 'em!

That twenty miles he'd walked along the trail had been a day's trek. And he still had plenty left in him for more.

"Kid," Runt let out slowly, "ride 'er hell-for-leather back to your station. I'll hit for the short cut."

Pete shook his head. "Naw, you better ride. You're gettin' old."

Nothing else the kid might have said could have started Runt boiling so fast. *Whack!*

That was the back of Runt's mitt and it sent the kid tottering. He recovered, swung at Runt and missed. Runt caught him coming back and sent him to the floor with a single blow to the chin.

"Still reckon I'm too old, kid?"

PETE didn't answer. He just sat there, his awed stare on Runt.

Runt pulled the kid to his feet. "Now git movin'. Any grub around here that the redskins didn't git?"

They took a quick look, found nothing. The raid had been a thorough one. Young Pete dug a half of a cold meat sandwich from his pocket and offered it to Runt. "All I got, but—" he looked down at the floor—"I ain't hungry."

Runt took a bite and handed it back. "Me either," he said, blowing out the candle. "Let's git goin'."

Outside, they shuffled through deepening drifts toward the stable. They swapped mochilas and Runt waited while the kid threw his mail over the saddle, mounted and swung his horse toward the east. "Good luck, kid."

Young Pete raised his hand, called something Runt couldn't make out, then lowered his head close to the pony's neck and rode away in a spray of white.

For several seconds Runt just stood there, rubbing at the smoothness of the leather mochila, guessing it weighed something like twenty pounds, hoping the letters were important—like some he'd delivered from wives, from mothers, and sweethearts back east. Little did it occur to him this cold November night, with the wind blowing 1860 to an end, that a new president had been elected and that the fate of the North and South hung by a fringe upon the messages in his arms. That's what Pete had said in parting: "Lincoln's 'lected!"

Runt inspected the mochila carefully, saw that it was waterproof and that all four pockets were locked. He folded it once over and shoved his arm through the slot provided for the cantle of the saddle. Pulling his head down into his coat collar, he gritted his teeth, slitted his eyes against the driving cold.

At the bend in the trail he stopped to probe with his boot in the snow. He wanted to be sure of solid footing. There were plenty of deep cuts filled with drifted snow and it would be like that all the way over the short cut.

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Under the far-reaching limbs of a pine he paused to get his bearings. You couldn't afford to get lost in a timbered short cut like this one. You'd never be found alive again!

He pushed on, climbing.

It was slow going. Much slower than if he'd kept to the trail around this mountain foothill. But if he kept his head, he'd save five miles. If he lost his head, he would lose. . . .

Life! That was another thing he'd been looking for. That and a horse. The kid, Pete—he was so young. He was nowhere near enough seasoned for a trek like this short cut would be. That's why Runt had to let the kid ride that horse. But the decision was already beginning to work on Runt's mind, and the tired aching of his muscles was starting to slow his legs. The kid's legs would have been better able to hold out. He hadn't been walking all day.

Runt fought off thoughts like these because he hadn't regretted his decision. To keep him from thinking about them, he talked to himself as he dug in a little harder and tried to space his rests a little farther apart.

Step after step, he continued on and up. With the piñon thicker overhead now, it was darker and he stumbled more often. Sometimes he fell.

The mochila was getting heavier and the cold seemed to be biting deeper through his clothes. He'd have to keep going more, not rest so often. Each rest gave the bitter sting of the cold a chance to get in deeper.

HE TRIED to keep thinking so he wouldn't notice the cold. Funny—he'd walked twenty miles for a horse—then, when he'd had a chance to ride, he'd passed it up because the kid was so young. But he was carrying the mail again, and that was what counted.

Suddenly he realized he *wasn't* carrying the mail. He was down again—and the mochila had fallen from his grasp. He was too tired to grab for it and the leather bag slid from the narrow ledge to the deep snow in the gully below.

He couldn't go on without the mail. The only reason he was there now was because of the mail.

He worked up enough strength in his body to dangle his legs over the rim. When he tried to dig in with his hands, hoping to get them in far enough to grab at something solid, it felt warm down deep and he wanted to leave them there. But that would never do. He had to keep moving. Rest without warmth would be the surest and quickest way to a permanent rest. And Runt Malone wasn't that tired!

But he was too tired to pull himself up. He drew up with one arm and felt his whole body pulling away from the ledge. He tried to dig into the sloped wall of snow, but his booted toes were too numb to tell him he'd missed. Once again, he tried a desperate clutching at the rim. He couldn't even reach it now. He could see it. It was farther away, growing farther.

Suddenly, as though the bottom had dropped out of the gully, he felt a sinking at the pit of his stomach and his head went into a dizzying whirl. Then he waited, for what seemed minutes, to hit bottom. But he didn't hit bottom. Surprisingly enough, he was now almost in a sitting position, sliding fast as the wind; but never once had he been out into space. The increasing speed of his descent threw his head back and he felt as though he wanted to rest again. But there was no rest now. He was still moving, faster and faster, bumping along, lashing out at both sides with his arms, hoping to check his speed.

The rough, smashing, banging treatment his back was getting shot his whole system through with a new, vigorous, life-

giving heat. What he wanted now was to hit bottom, and he hoped that the plunge would not bury him under. His answer came quickly. Again, he saw the mochila. It was under him. Great as his speed was, the mochila had stopped his descent into the seemingly bottomless mass of drifted snow.

With new life, he clutched the mochila and tried digging into the snow for a foothold. Part way up, he lost his footing, fell, and dug in again. He tried it a little off to the side this time, but his legs were ready to buckle.

Out over the opposite side of the gully, the rim was not so high. It would throw him off his trail, but that would be no worse than settling back to wait for a white death to cover him over. He gritted his teeth and floundered along. But his going was rough and the mochila was getting heavier. He stumbled often and fell.

THE gray of morning was in the east when he noticed that he couldn't feel the mail sack. It was there all right. He could see it. But he couldn't feel it!

It wasn't long after that before all sense of feeling left his arms. And it was going out of his legs. All right, let his legs be numb. That way he could slog along, mile after mile, and they wouldn't hurt. . . .

He made it to the top of the grade and started down. But as near as he was now to the Overland trail, life seemed far away. He was getting cold inside!

He rubbed frantically at his middle. It didn't seem to help and he took a few more lurching steps into the downward slope, and fell again, wallowing deep in the snow. He didn't even try to get up this time. He knew he couldn't. . . .

Freezing wasn't so bad. If his stomach could get like his arms and legs—why, he'd never even feel it. This downgrade wasn't bad either. He rolled over on the mochila, pulled part of it up to form a bend in front. Then he pushed; first with an arm, then a leg. It kept him moving. Not fast. But he was moving.

Then the slope flattened out and he knew he had reached the end of his trail. Death could come any time now. He'd fought hard, desperate in his determination to get the mail back on the Overland. They'd find it right here beside his frozen body. No—no they wouldn't!

No one would take this trail. He was probably the first man who'd been here for years—

Say, wait a minute—wait—by the frozen tail of a brass monkey!

He couldn't be sure right off, but there was a vague familiarity about this place. For a long moment he lay there, blinking.

The morning brightness was hurting his eyes. Like in the rest of his body, the pain was anguishing. But it was welcome—sweet. It was the pain of life.

He was looking at a familiar tree! The top branches were rotted away and much of the trunk had been opened up by the passing of time.

It had been years since he'd seen that tree. But there was something about the shape of that hollow trunk that was unmistakable. He couldn't be mistaken.

WITH a reserve of strength he hadn't known he possessed, he crawled to the tree, pulled himself up with arms about the trunk. The hole was full of snow! He couldn't see the jug. After all these years it was more than a man could expect. But he pawed down through the snow, digging deep.

His mitted hand struck something. Somehow he wrestled it out. It was the jug all right! Never, in all his life, had a jug felt so heavy. And he'd hoisted this one many times before.

This jug held life! Life, if he used it right—death if he misused one of man's most pleasant privileges.

Runt used it right. He took a swal-

low, let it down slowly, then sat back, waiting for the gradual warmth he knew would be there. Something moved inside him, stopped, and he grew cold again. He took another swallow, a longer one this time. Again he sat back and waited. Tiny needles pricked at him from within. The numbness left his stomach.

Gradually he felt warm again around the heart and the tingling began in his arms and legs.

The jug was there at his side. He looked at it, wondering how much a man needed, hoping there'd be enough. He raised the jug again, held it long and tenderly. Right then he got his answer. For the first time, he actually felt the urge to get to his feet.

Once up, he lifted the mochila and it seemed lighter. He took a step forward, then another. His legs were still numb, but he could control them. Several more steps and he felt he was good for the trek to Green River station. Another two miles like this and he'd be able to *see* it!

Step after step, he experimented, like a baby learning to walk. He was actually fascinated with the progress he was making. Warm blood was now coursing his veins. Another drink and he would be able to make it. He'd just go back and take one more for good measure.

He let the mochila down, turned around. He couldn't believe his eyes. That hollow tree was unbelievably far back. Well, if the going was this good, he wouldn't stop now, much less retrace one unnecessary step. He'd keep his head!

HE DIDN'T have to walk that last three miles along the Overland trail. He couldn't have made it, anyway. He was met by a rider from the "home" station. That was all he remembered. He didn't know how he'd gotten up in the saddle, but he guessed the rider must have carried him.

Right now, he was lying in a warm bunk and there were voices nearby. No longer was the snow covering him over. His legs ached, but it was the ache of a long rest. A tug at his shoulder jarred him to his senses. He sat up and pawed at his eyes. They burned, but only because of the long, deep sleep.

A black-bearded face was staring down at him. He knew that face. Only two days back, maybe three, and that same face had ordered him on his way.

"When yuh reckon yuh'll eat?" It was the voice of the station boss.

"Now," said Runt, "leastways, I hope it'll be now."

"Yeah," another voice snarled. "I don't leave nobody sleep in my bunk."

Runt looked up, saw young Pete, and thought for sure he was joshing. His genuine enthusiasm at seeing the kid again, safe, caused Runt to lurch from the bed.

For some reason, Pete's face sobered abruptly. He must have remembered another time when he and Runt had not entirely understood each other. This time, it was Pete's fist first, and the blow caught Runt hard over the right eye. Runt slashed out with a quick right and left that brought them together in a clinch. Then the station boss joined in. He got between the two and held them apart at arm's length.

"All right, you two," he roared, "fight's over. Neither one wins. Fight ag'in, an' yuh both lose yore jobs."

"Job?" echoed Runt. "A ridin' job?"

"Right," said the station boss, "carryin' the mail. Pete told me how you found Shorty Hawkins."

"Thanks . . . thanks." The words were hard coming; something had caught in Runt's throat. Again he would carry the mail—at a hundred a month and found.

It wasn't the hundred a month that meant so much to him. It was the "found." He'd found himself. He'd found the old life again!

It was while he was sitting at the pine-

board table, filling himself with stew, eating and talking as he ate, that three blasts from a bugle brought him to his feet. No time to lose, now. The westbound mail was coming through and Runt Malone would carry it on.

* * *

On payday, a month later, the Division superintendent climbed down from the Overland stage at Green River station. Officials from the Sacramento terminal in the west and the St. Joseph terminal in the east, making their periodical inspection of the system, were with the superintendent.

"Slap-damn! if this ain't a celebration." Runt whispered to Pete out of the side of his mouth. "Orta have a drink."

The big-wigs filed inside and all hands gathered around. The superintendent went to the head of the table. The room became quiet as he rose to speak.

"Men," he said, throatily, "the officials of this great, farflung organization and the Pony Express, with its eighty or more, courageous, leather-skinned riders; four-five hundred horses, two hundred stations and station-keepers and as many assistants—we're all proud of the records you men are making. I refer, in particular, to the record you men made in getting the news of Mr. Lincoln's election through.

"The fame of our organization is growing. And the organization is growing. It is with great pleasure that we add to our regular staff of riders, Mr. R. Malone. What Mr. Malone has accomplished could only have been accomplished through courage and fine, clean, temperate living, so let it be said that Mr. Malone stands as an excellent example of the type of men required to perform so important a duty.

"Now, Mr. R. Malone, it is with great pleasure that I hand you herewith, the regular oath to be signed by all employees."

"Uh—huh—you're welcome," Runt managed to say. "I mean—thanks."

He took the paper, went back to his seat and read:

"I, (——), do hereby solemnly swear that during my engagement, and while I am an employee of Russel, Majors & Waddell, I will, under no circumstances use profane language; that I will drink no intoxicating liquors; that I will not quarrel or fight with any other employee of the firm. . . ."

Runt stared at the paper, read it again and stared some more. Then he lifted a pen and laboriously scribbled down his name.

There was a strange expression on his face when he finished, but if anyone noticed, they wouldn't have suspected what it was. Runt Malone had just added another to his many vices—perjury.

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* * * *

Walt Coburn brings you "Dally Man," a gripping long novelette of the Arizona range; "Without Convoy," by Walter Havighurst, is a thrilling yarn of the men who go down to the sea in ships in war time; "Never Despair" and "Sea Power Belongs at Sea," episodes in the martial education of Lieutenant Peter Dickoe of His Majesty's Marines; then there's the second instalment of "Freeze and Be Damned!" Robert Ormond Case's smashing serial of arctic adventure; plus other good shorts and departments.

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Blizzard Rendezvous

By BARRY CORD

Cinnamon's suddenly rearing cayuse took the kid's lead. . . .

It was only natural that the kid whom Bill Treadwell had taken in would want to be the first to ride out after old Bill's murderer. . . . Or was it because there happened to be a blood-money reward on the kid's head dating to the time when he and that ruthless red-handed outlaw had been saddle-mates?

BILL TREADWELL stirred sleepily in his chair as a gust of wind rattled the store windows. The fire was dying down in the pot bellied stove, and he felt the chill of the outside cold seeping into the room. Treadwell roused himself, looked up at the old wall clock, and grunted softly. It was time to close up.

He heaved his heavy frame erect,

tapped his old briar against the counter. From the storeroom under the stairs that led to his living quarters came the sound of a box being dragged into place.

"Let it go, Eddie!" he called out. "It's time to lock up and turn in."

He filled his pipe away with slow, careful motions and started for the door. He walked heavily, with the tread of a man who has done little physical exertion for many years. His hair was brown, sparse, and his features were rounded and genial. He was an easy-going man who wouldn't hurt a fly. He had a habit of laughing softly to himself as he dozed in his chair with his pipe gone dead in his mouth.

He was chuckling, now, over some remembered incident as he reached out to bolt the door. Its sudden opening caught him by surprise. The door edge hit his forehead as he bent forward with enough force to straighten him and send him back a pace. He saw stars in that instant; felt a blast of icy air wrap around him. Then the door closed, and the hard muzzle of a six-gun jabbed into his soft stomach.

Treadwell gasped.

The stars faded, and he saw the man behind the threatening muzzle. A tall, rawboned gent with a sharp angled, weatherbeaten face that held as much emotion as a piece of granite, and eyes that were like twin pieces of ice. A bleached mustache shrouded a thin upper lip. The intruder's nose was long and thin and blue with cold, as if he had been waiting outside for some time.

"All right, pot-belly!" he whispered sharply. "Back up! Make it quiet an' natural. I want that money yuh got salted away in here!"

Treadwell backed up. His face was pale. "You're makin' a mistake," he said. "I ain't—"

The hammer clicked back under the man's thumb, and Treadwell read death in his bleak eyes. The old storekeeper had seen some bad men in his time. But none quite as cold and callous as this killer. Treadwell's throat felt suddenly dry and choked up.

"I ain't stallin', pot-belly!" the sharp-faced intruder warned softly. "It's all over town about you keepin' yore money in a tin box in yore store. Talk says yuh got near fifteen thousand stowed away, and I'd be plumb satisfied with half that." The muzzle hooked deeper into Treadwell's quivering stomach. "I ain't got time for more palaver. Git it!"

Treadwell tensed. That money . . . he had been saving it, a little at a time, for twelve years. Twelve years to make a dream come true. There was a horse spread up on a benchland in the Whitefaces . . . a big rambling house, corrals, barns.

But no man's dreams can stand up against reality. And reality was pressing him now, in shape of a round, deadly muzzle held in a bony fist. He nodded, dry-lipped, and went around the counter. The killer followed on his heels like some ominous shadow. The wind whistled against the loose windows.

TREADWELL bent, rolled a half-filled flour barrel out of the way. He went down to his knees, probed at a loose floor board, reached inside . . . .

Sight of the bonehandled .44 on top of the box was a sudden shock. He had hated banks, since the first one he had put his money in had failed, and he had relied on this hiding place from that time. He had placed that there gun for just such an emergency, but confronted with that emergency now, he couldn't use it. He had his back to the cold-eyed thief, and he knew the man could not see the gun. His thick fingers fumbled with it, and sweat seeped into his eyes. Then he laid it aside, lifted the tin box up instead.

But he kept seeing twelve years of work fade away, and suddenly angry desper-

ation wrenched free of restraining caution. His hand dipped into the opening again, closed about the cold bone handle—

The double blast of the holdup man's gun smashed the silence. Treadwell jerked. He seemed to freeze, down on his knees, with one thick arm still out of sight in the hole in the floor. His head turned, slowly, and his eyes were wide and astonished and pained. Then they glazed. He slumped down, his thick shoulder pressing hard against the flour barrel.

The killer was beside him, scooping up the tin box. He straightened, was half way to the exit when the door under the stairs jerked open. The killer shifted fast, his gun glinting in a sudden arc. But then his thumb froze on the hammer and recognition shook the cold sneer from his lips.

"Tucson!" His voice gusted. There was fear in it, and wonder. Then the gun in his fist spouted flame.

The youngster in the doorway staggered. Blood spurted down his narrow face. Some instinctive motion spun him back and to one side, out of sight in the darkness of the storeroom.

Lead ripped splinters from the door jamb. Then the cold-eyed killer leaped to the exit, a thin snarl riding his lips.

A moment later the pound of shod hoofs beat against the wintry night. The cold wind swept in through the open door, ruffling Treadwell's thin hair, seeming to whisper mockingly of the dreams and plans of men . . . .

MEN crowded into the store. Voices filled the long room. Sheriff Boltman, a big blunt faced man with keen eyes looked down at Treadwell's body with grim face. What had happened was plain. Rage quivered the sheriff's voice.

"Made him git the money an' then plugged him in the back!" The lawman pivoted away, his jaw knotted. "Joshua—take care of things here. The rest of us are ridin'. An' we ain't comin' back without the polecat responsible. He went north, racketin' hell for leather. There's only one way out of the valley that way . . . ."

Hard-eyed men crowded after him. Joshua looked down at the storekeeper. He could hear the sheriff bellow orders, hear the sounds of gathering hoofs, the jingle and rattle of gear. Then the posse pounded out, and silence settled over the small cowtown shivering under the cold, bright stars.

Joshua stiffened, rubbed gnarled hands. Best to get Marlowe here. This was an undertaker's job, now.

He stiffened in his turning, his thickset body jerking nervously. A bloody faced figure had appeared in the doorway under the stairs. A wiry figure. Brown, sinewy fingers gripped the framing, held the youngster erect.

Joshua relaxed. "Hell! We plumb forgot about yuh, Eddie. The sheriff took out in a hurry after the damn killer that got Bill, an'—"

The youngster called Eddie steadied himself, wiped blood from his eyes. Eddie he was known to everyone in town. But only as Eddie—the kid who worked for Treadwell for his bed and keep.

His gaze focused on the storeman's body. He pushed away from the door, walked unsteadily across the room. He didn't look at Joshua, didn't seem to know the old livery man was there at all. He halted by Treadwell's body stared down at it.

He was young, this kid, with the hair on his chin and upper lip just beginning to stiffen. His face was narrow, not handsome, and his lips were thin and cold. There was a hardness in the bleak stare of his eyes, in the set of his mouth, that time could never erase . . . .

The wind howled against the windows with harsh insistence. It reminded Eddie of the night he had staggered into the store, half frozen to death, with a festering slug hole in his left shoulder. Bill Tread-

well had taken him in that night, and asked no questions. He had asked none in the year that followed, and Eddie had ventured no explanation. But a bond had grown between them, and for the first time in his life the kid had come to like a man, feel respect and loyalty for someone.

He straightened, wiped blood from his eyes. His head throbbed harshly, and he felt weak, light-headed. He turned to Joshua, as if seeing him for the first time. "Where's the sheriff?" he asked harshly. "I got somethin' to tell him."

JOSHUA stared. This kid, somehow, was a stranger. There was a deadliness in his voice, in his manner, that the old livery man had never seen.

"The sheriff went out after the polecat that did this, kid," he explained. "They rode north. Reckon Boltman figgers he kin git him before he makes Bighorn Pass. He had Wyman telegraph Sheriff Salters to bottle up the Bighorn from the other side." Joshua's voice thinned. "Boltman ain't overlookin' any bets. The way it is he'll have the killer before tomorrer night—"

The youngster's lips twisted. "Mebbe." He turned, went back into the storeroom. He lighted a lantern that hung from a nail, set it up on a cracker barrel. The dim glow outlined his hard face. He pulled back boxes from a corner of the windowless room, reached down. He came erect with a dark bundle he had wanted to forget, that held memories of a wild, unpleasant life.

His fingers fumbled with the tie strings. The black folds of a bullet torn coat fell away, and light glinted dully from a matched pair of cedar handled Colts, from shells looped in twin cartridge belts.

He fastened those belts, one at time, about his slim waist with the look of a man who knows what he's doing. Spread

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out on the bundle was a faded poster. Eddie picked it up, read it, his gaze darkening with old memories. His hand clenched with the surge of his emotion, crumpling the paper in his fist.

The heavy guns on his thighs seemed to change him from the quiet mannered youngster who had helped Treadwell around the store. When he came out of the storeroom and glanced at the gaping Joshua, he was a grim faced man.

"Take care of Bill," he muttered. "I don't reckon I'll be comin' back . . . ." Then he remembered the paper still crumpled in his fist, and he threw it aside with hard, impatient gesture. His hands went down to his belts, shifted them to easier setting.

Joshua watched him go out into the night. The livery man's mouth was still open with his surprise. He closed it, finally, shuffled to the crumpled paper Eddie had cast aside.

He smoothed it out, read it, his breath catching in his throat. "Hell an' tarnation!" he muttered. "The Tucson Kid!" His gaze lifted from the dodger to the windows that gave him a glimpse of the dark street. A wiry figure was leading a saddled horse out of the alley, mounting, pivoting away. Joshua's hand trembled. "Eddie—*the Tucson killer* . . . ."

THE "Tucson killer" rode north. An icy wind whistled through his threadbare coat, chilling his slight frame. The pain in his head was a harsh pounding that threatened nausea with every hard jolt of the running gray.

He topped a small knoll, looked back. The gray fidgeted impatiently at the momentary pause.

Far down in the blackness of the valley lights glittered. Those lights had been home for a year to the Kid. Home! A dark bitterness hardened the Kid's eyes. In all the twenty-two years of his life he had never known a home other than a jolting wagon always on the move, and later, the shelter of the dark trails, of shacks tucked back in hidden retreats. Not till Bill Treadwell had taken him in with him.

Slowly he raised a cold hand. "Adios, Bill."

The gray lunged around, went down the long slope. The Kid thought of the posse ahead of him, and his lips twisted into thin sneer.

Sheriff Boltman wouldn't get the man who had killed Treadwell. Because Boltman didn't know. Didn't know there was another way out of the valley. The Tucson Kid's sneer thinned. He knew, because he had come through that hidden cliff slit the night he had staggered into the store. And Cinnamon Bradley knew. Bradley, the deadly Pecos killer—the man who had killed Bill tonight. For it had been Bradley who had shown him the way, once, when they had been trailmates heading for the Border.

The Kid let his hand fall to his gun butt. The sound of the lunging gray rode with him, and the wind made a wailing sound in the cedars.

Ahead of him the valley began to narrow, began to lift toward the dark, jagged hills. On either side great stone barriers began to bottle in the valley. Up ahead, far in the darkness, Bighorn Pass was a dark notch against the cloud filling sky.

The Kid turned, went west in a veering arc . . . .

Dawn lightened a low, leaden sky. The wind had shifted to the north, and there was the smell of snow in the drive of it. The pines tossed green branches in creaking protest, and somewhere up on the shrouded slopes a wolf uttered a sharp, lonesome cry.

The fissure in the gray cliff wall for which the Kid had unerringly ridden was narrow, half hidden by a giant oak that groaned restlessly to the steady drive of the wind. The Kid's eyes quested swiftly

over the hard earth, and a thin sneer edged his lips.

He had beaten Bradley to the Pass, as he had known he would. For Cinnamon would take time to veil his tracks before heading for the split.

The Kid rode into the narrow, rubble strewn gash and dismounted. His long sinewy fingers were numb with cold. He blew on them as he squatted in the middle of the narrow gap; tried to rub some warmth into them before Bradley came.

CINNAMON BRADLEY eased his weary cayuse. His sharp features held a triumphant sneer as he looked back among the pines. He had given the posse the slip, and he knew from the way they had been riding his trail that they would not stop to decipher the tangle he had left, but would push on toward Bighorn Pass, sure of his ultimate destination.

Bradley's sneer widened. His gaze swung around to the thin crack in the sheer gray wall ahead of him. Needle Pass. As such was it known to the grim riders of the owlhoot.

Bradley relaxed as he nosed the roan around the creaking oak that almost hid the narrow gap. He could take it easy, from here on—

The wiry figure squatting in the middle of the passageway said: "You took a long time gettin' here, Cinnamon. I near froze to death, waitin'!"

For one thin moment that scene held: the tall, rawboned killer surged forward in his stirrups, a look of harsh surprise in his weathered face—the Kid, rising slowly, his numbed hands hooked above jutting gun butts. . . .

Then Cinnamon moved, slashed down for his Colt!

The Kid shifted with that inhuman speed he always had, but his hands were cold with waiting. The slash of shots boomed heavily in the narrow fissure.

The Kid jerked, stepped back several paces. Cinnamon's suddenly rearing cayuse took the Kid's lead, came down on crumbling forelegs.

Cinnamon whipped out of his saddle before the falling roan trapped him. He pivoted, like a bayed panther, his gun flaring toward the Kid in vicious, red-tongued drives. The return fire raked a long gash along his left forearm. He jerked back, his face distorted with pain and fear, seeking escape from that deadly gun. A gouge in the gray wall caught his desperate glance, and he dove for it, made it while lead screamed with baffled rage from the rocks.

He pressed back in the shallow cutback, his Colt nestled in his fist, a trapped glitter chilling his eyes. Blood made a warm trickle down his arm. He shivered, his lips pulling back in brittle snarl.

He couldn't see the Kid from where he was. But the Kid couldn't get a shot at him, either. The tightness in the outlaw's throat relaxed, and he eased forward a bit. He could see his dead cayuse, not five feet in front of where he crouched—see the bulge in the saddle bag that held over eight thousand dollars.

The wind wailed coldly through the fissures, and to Bradley, crouching in that shallow cut, it carried a note of bitter mockery. Eight thousand dollars and freedom lay past that wiry youngster with the deadly guns. Eight thousand dollars. . . .

HE TOOK a crouched step forward, his gun held ready in his right hand. Lead struck the rock two inches above his head. Reflex jerked him back, just in time. Lead lashed the rock again where his face had been, whined away with ugly sound.

Thin curses welled to Cinnamon's lips. He was trapped here in this cut. As long as the Kid waited in the narrow Pass he had to stay huddled up. The Kid had him, there was no doubt of it. He had to make a deal with that wiry youngster, or else

wait here till night, and then take his chances.

"Kid!" he called out. "Kid! We're bein' a pair of damn fools. There's eight thousand dollars in those saddle bags. Enough for both of us to take it easy for a long time down in Mexico. Kid! I didn't know it was you last night when I triggered." He shifted, crept closer. "We got a clean trail ahead. What you say?"

There was silence. The cold was bitter. Down at the entrance to the Pass the oak creaked, as if protesting.

Then the Kid's answer came. Cold, curiously strained, spoken as if with effort.

"That storekeeper yuh murdered, Cinnamon, took me in when I was shot to hell an' near dyin'. Took me in an' treated me like a son. Mebbe a thing like that don't mean nothin' to you. Mebbe—" the Kid's low voice rasped—"mebbe I'm bein' a damn fool. I ain't been exactly a honest man. I've had it tough since I kin remember, an' there's some things along my back trail I ain't exactly proud of. But I'm gonna enjoy killin 'a skunk by name of Cinnamon Bradley!"

Bradley swore. The Kid wasn't fooling him none with a yarn like that. Bradley knew the Kid. The Kid didn't give a damn about the storekeeper. He was waiting for a chance to get that eight thousand himself. Cinnamon's pale eyes shifted to the dead horse. The Kid would have to show himself if he tried it. Cinnamon's lips twisted as he blew on his gun hand. It looked like a waiting game.

MINUTES passed. He could hear the Kid moving about, hear strange cracklings, as if he were breaking branches. He stiffened, tried to make something of the sounds. Then a scurry of wind brought a sharp odor to his nostrils, sent him back on his haunches. Smoke! A fire! What in hell was the Kid doing?

"Kid!" he snarled above the wail of the wind. "You want to bring that posse over here. If they spot that smoke—"

There was no sound now from the Kid. Cinnamon tensed. He moved to the gouge edge . . . and lead powdered the rock again.

Cinnamon jerked back, his bony face ridged with fear. "You can't keep me holed up in here till that posse comes, Kid. I'll come out shootin' first!"

The icy wind carried the Kid's low voice. "Come ahead, Cinnamon. I'm waitin'—"

Cinnamon balanced on his toes, the gun in his fist cocked and ready. But the grim picture of the Kid waiting choked back the surge of his anger. The Kid was good with a Colt—damn good.

He settled back, swearing thinly. The minutes dragged, became hours. He shifted cramped muscles, blew on numbed hands. His left arm stabbed him with steady, ominous pain.

"Kid!" he yelled out. "Don't be a damn fool! You kin have the whole eight thousand! Just let me out of here—let me ride double with you to the ford at Wrangler's Creek—"

Only the crackling fire and the wind answered him. Desperation tensed him, sent a cold sweat over his rawboned frame.

Snow began to drift slowly into the fissure. Heavy flakes that made soft, spitting sound against rock and brush. How much time passed Cinnamon had no means of knowing. It was an eternity of waiting; of freezing in the bitter cold, afraid to stir . . . waiting with his eyes glued on the stiffened carcass of his roan . . . waiting and wondering why the Kid made no move . . . .

The pound of hoofs finally aroused him from his numbed lethargy. And he realized acutely that he had waited too long.

The strange terror suddenly left him, now that escape was impossible. His gaze lingered on the bulge in the saddle bag, and he swore bitterly. Eight thousand dollars and a clear trail—and a kid had

stepped out of the past to bar his getaway . . . .

HE COULD hear the sound of voices now, lifting above the ring of shod hoofs on frozen ground. The posse was dismounting, coming into the narrow fissure afoot. Bradley's sneer hardened. The Kid had done this. But the Kid would die—with him!

His leg muscles tensed with his decision. Snow lashed his bitter face. Then he jumped, whirled. His straining eyes probed the snow curtain, caught sight of a figure huddled against the rock wall behind a dying fire. A horse picketed beyond, thumped uneasily. A horse he could have used if only—

He pulled the trigger twice. The Kid did not move. He stayed huddled against that gray wall, a faint smile on his lips . . . .

Behind Bradley guns lanced their flares of death. The killer went down to his knees. He twisted, pulled the trigger steadily till the hammer clicked on spent shells. Then he coughed, spat out blood. There was a roaring in his head, and darkness was in his eyes . . . .

The Kid had won, after all.

He was dead when Sheriff Boltman stood over him. The lawman let his gaze take in the scene, and he nodded, slowly, with understanding. Someone at the sheriff's shoulder muttered in an awed tone. "Eddie trapped him in this split, looks like, sheriff. An' they shot it out, just before we came!"

The sheriff nodded. He walked to the Kid, looked down at him. "Eddie!" He bent, gripped the youngster's shoulder, then suddenly stiffened.

"Hell!" he muttered slowly, and looked back to Cinnamon's sprawled body. "The kid's stiff as a board. He must have been dead for hours . . . ."

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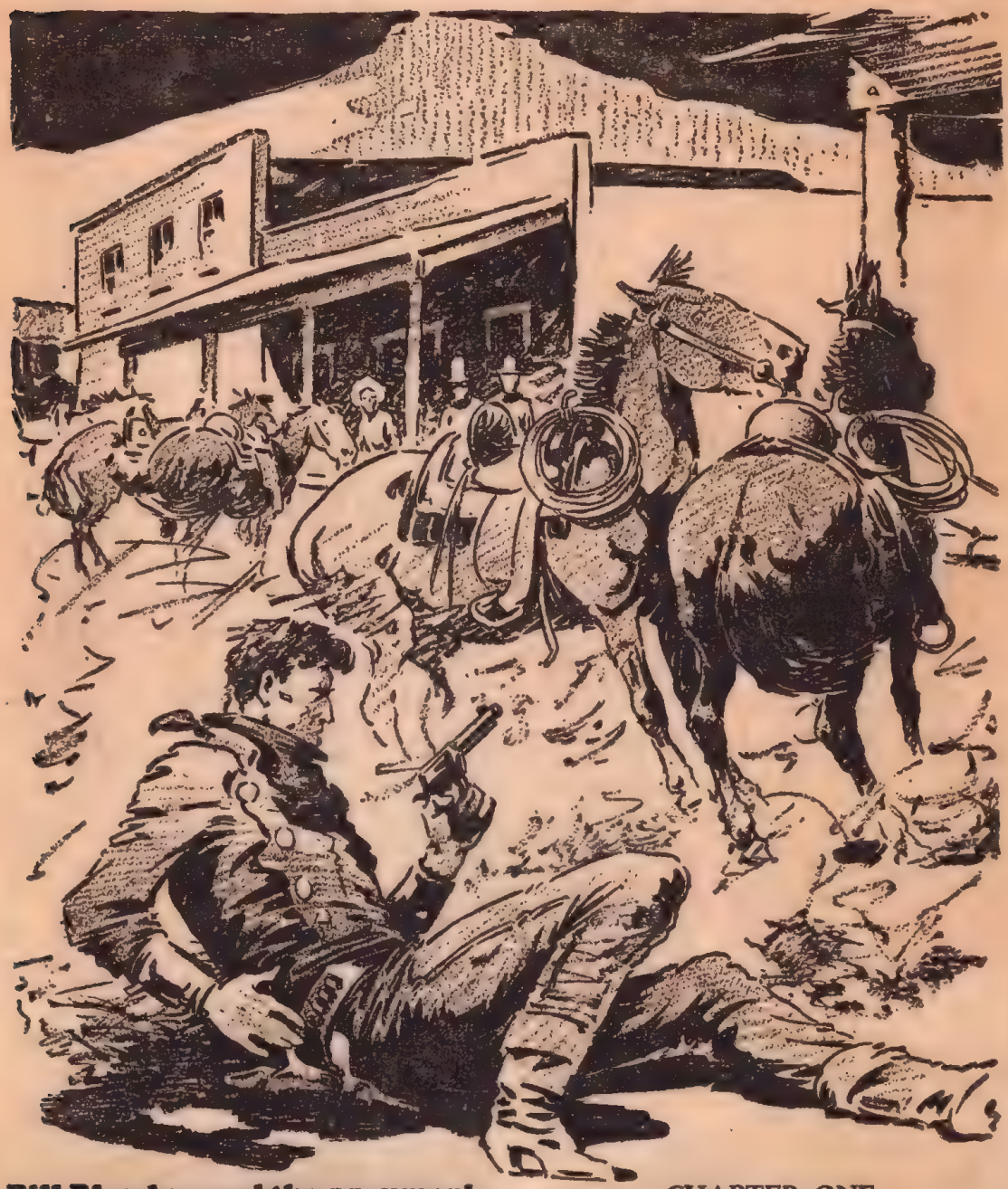


Bill Bland cursed the pneumonia that had robbed him of his hearing and left him helpless. For he knew that the ruthless dryguich gang that had been spreading terror and death on the fur lanes to Taos was bound to spot old Quart Denton's Luck Lady mine ... and the lovely little lady old Quart had inherited!

CHAPTER ONE

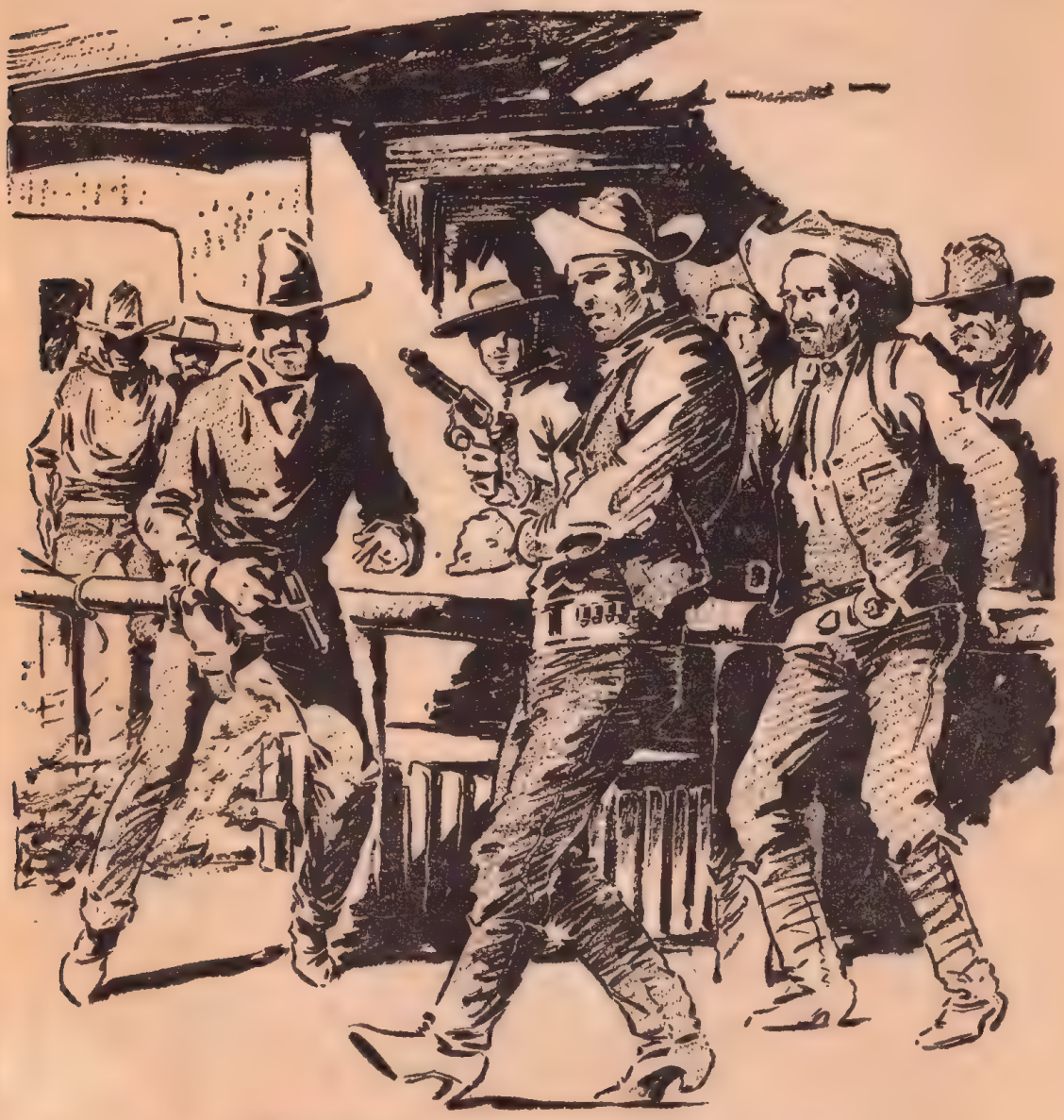
Moving Lips

DEEP spring was in the mountains and Taos was alive. The buckskin legion of the fur lanes was down for hell and hilarity. Plew was heavy in the pack of each, and men were

Fur Lanes

the Fur Country

By HARLAN GRAVES



Bland rolled over . . . and came up gun in hand. . . .

gay . . all but tight-lipped Bill Bland.

Taos meant only business to him this year. Old Quart Denton would be waiting at the mouth of the mine shaft beyond town, waiting for his partner and the furs, waiting for more cash to pour into the hope that was the Lucky Lady. Quart had been waiting last year, too, and after the catch had been sold, the two had run a red rampage of high fun down the adobe-walled streets of Taos. But that was before the pneumonia last fall, before malign fate had robbed Bill Bland of his hearing.

As he neared the town, Bill felt a nameless fear within him. For weeks he had dreaded this moment. He knew he couldn't linger in town this year. He knew others would stare at him as at a man gone mildly mad. The laughter, the

jibes, the crackling exchange of rough humor which marked the yearly rendezvous, or get-together at the end of the seasons, would be gone—gone because Bill could not hear the words of others nor understand their laughter. Worse than that, he would feel every unheard joke was an underhanded play upon this thing that made him helpless.

His bow-legged pony switched a tail still rough with winter hair, and he gave the impatient animal its head.

The streets of Taos opened before him. He came up before the wide veranda of Kit Carson's trading post. Flashing Kit, the debonair Taos Thunderhead, was away with General Fremont in the San Luis country to the north. But his post was open as usual, its famous hospitality drawing men from the streets in a steady stream. Bill paused in the square and shut his eyes.

He knew that a turmoil of roistering men was pouring about him, yet with his eyes closed he could believe that he was again at the vast, silent gorge of the mighty Arkansas where he had wintered and strung his catch. Gaunt, dark as a Navajo, a stone-faced giant astride a shaggy pony, Bill was a strange figure hunching in the square. He was suddenly aware of this, and opened his eyes.

Faces singled themselves out from the crowd moving about him. Some were little more than blank patches of weathered skin fringed in matted hair. Others suddenly cracked open in a grin, or moved in a brief nod of recognition. Then a strange figure moved into Bland's view, and his eyes riveted on it.

A woman! A woman on the streets of Taos!

He stared in fascination. She was not the squat squaw of a mountain-man, nor one of the hollow-cheeked denizens of Buck Schwind's Colorado House. She was something else, a woman born to a better life than either of these. He saw that she had just now swung down from the Santa Fe stage and was talking to the driver who walked with her.

Ninab, the Great-Bellied, squaw ruler of the Eagle Utes, had taught Bill during two months in her camp how words might be read from the movement of silent lips. Now he swore because Ninab's teaching had not extended to the reading of movement along a half-hidden, piquant profile.

THE girl and the driver moved across the compound toward Carson's post. Bill swung down and followed, handing the reins of his mount and pack-mule to a dirty little Navajo. As usual, Kit Carson's veranda was crowded with loafing men. Among them, Bill saw one whose face brought him little pleasure.

Buck Schwind made more money from the annual beaver catch of the Sangre de Cristo country than the best of the fur men. But he made few friends in the process. An occasional ugly rumor swept through the town about the methods employed within the tinsel-decked walls of the Colorado House, and the buckskin legion was wary. This year however, with Kit Carson away, Schwind had everything his way. Down from the hills and seeking fun, the mountain-men paid him the taxes he levied for the raw pleasures to be found under the oak beams of his gambling house. Some paid with ill grace and some died, but Schwind grew rich.

Schwind was standing with one of his dealers along the rail of Carson's place. And though he and the girl were yet thirty yards away, Ninab's training made it easy for Bill to read the words on the gambler's lips. He saw suddenly hot eyes focus avidly on the slight form of the girl pacing beside the dusty stage driver. Buck's whistle was not audible at that distance, but the twist of his lips was unmistakable, as were the words that followed.

"We need a new girl, Luke?" the gambler asked the man beside him.

The dealer's answer was a knowing grin, and Bill watched carefully as Schwind went on.

"There's Bland, just in . . . roll him . . . before he gets chance to . . . Might squeeze . . . into sellin'. . . . The gambler paused, and his eyes drifted back to the figure of the girl. "Say," his lips moved again. "Those Navajos . . . nothing like filly waltzin' this way!"

Fury surged within Bill. The brazen plans for his own downfall meant nothing. But the gambler's remark was an insult to a woman whose kind belonged to a boyish past now dimmed with years. He forgot that only he could have understood those words across thirty yards of tumult-ridden space. He forgot that neither Schwind nor the girl would understand his action. His stride lengthened and corded muscles tightened across his shoulder.

He reached the rail paces ahead of the girl and the driver. Buck Schwind seemed to sense his errand, for he spun in puzzled concern toward the stony-faced mountainman. Bill's speech had grown short in the months of silence, and as is common among men who cannot hear their own words, his voice was powerful and toneless.

"If you know nice talk, Schwind," he grated, "you better peddle it for the lady!"

Schwind stood rooted for a moment in surprise. Then a hard sneer of comprehension crossed his face. His voice was a resentful snarl.

"You're drunk, Bland!" he snapped. "Or crazy! I never seen a lady in my life —especially in Taos! Now get inside or back to your broomtail. I don't like your smell under my nose!"

BILL'S eyes followed the words as they lashed through the other's heavy beard. And because his eyes were fastened on it, the hunching drive of his white-knuckled fist found the gambler's mouth. Six feet of hard muscle was behind that drive, and perhaps some of the bitterness his deafness had brought him. The shock of the blow backed along his forearm and into his shoulder. He wiped split knuckles against the buckskin of a greasy thigh, and stepped back.

Schwind staggered, every joint loosened by that impact. His frock-coated shoulder caught the edge of Carson's huge oak door. A rusty hinge snapped loudly and the great panel crashed into the tap-room, the gambler going with it, flat on his back. For a moment he lay as he had fallen. Then he surged dazedly to his feet and leaned against the jamb, an unsteady hand seeking to straighten loosened teeth.

The crash of the great door brought the crowd running from the bar within. Among them was a white-headed, bandy-legged oldster. Schwind caught his breath and teetered toward the man who had felled him, but the oldster was quicker. He streaked forward, caught Bill by the shoulder, and spun him through another door off the veranda. Schwind followed, but the grizzled old man met him at the door with a cocked Navy pistol and a hard

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grin. The gambler turned away, mumbling something Bill could not catch. Then the bandy-legged oldster was back at his side, facing Bill across the table in Carson's office.

It was Bill who spoke first. "Leavin' the reservation, eh?" he grunted. "Thought you was to do the minin' side of keepin' the Lucky Lady going on!"

"Tarnation!" Bill watched his partner complain. "What's eatin' yuh? No need to . . . Schwind . . . yuh don't like. . . . And me, yuh knows damn well . . . come in fer likker once in a while! Got a devil in yuh or somethin'?"

A slow smile softened Bill's face. He shook his head.

"Not after seein' you, you old rock-eatin' gopher! How's the Lady?"

Denton's eyes widened in alarm.

"Meanin' which one?"

Bill stared at his partner. "The one with the silver in her boots!" he said. "The mine!"

"Oh, that!" Denton's sigh dripped relief. "Figgered maybe . . . the other. Son, the Lucky Lady is doin' proud. But the other—wal . . . trouble. . . . Reckon we both got plenty. You beg a beatin' at the hands of Buck Schwind, and me—wal—I inherit a gal!"

CHAPTER TWO

The Mad Miner

OLD QUART'S story was short and pithy. Part of it was a tale of woe concerning the last trick of an unreliable brother. Rennie Denton, described only as female and twenty, was westward bound for the shelter of her uncle's roof.

"And the hell of it is," Quart wailed, "I ain't even got a roof! . . . strong wind . . . took the canvas off my lean-to at the Lucky Lady. Of all the slab-footed luck!"

The rest of Quart's bitter recital came in a quieter voice, a voice laced with helpless desperation. He spoke slowly, and Bill caught almost all his words.

"Taos has been right tight for three months, Bill," the old man said. "You pulled the cork . . . clouted Buck Schwind. . . . Kit Carson scouting with Fremont in the San Luis . . . Schwind crew has taken the town over. Got their own tradin' company and their own prices. Al Bronson and Jim Tipton left Del Norte Valley more'n five weeks ago with the top catch . . . ain't showed yet. Lescoulie hasn't showed. Rimadon and Varno plumb disappeared . . . yesterday Schwind shipped six thousand worth . . . no one here sold to him. The squeeze is down on the whole damn rendezvous! All the sign points to Schwind, but he's keepin' clear!"

"Then break the rendezvous!" Bill grunted. "Circulate the word for the boys to gather at Bent's place. Bent always pays a level price."

Denton shook his head. "The Colorado House boys sets a wider snare than that. Six weeks after Kit Carson left, his post ran out of supplies. Seems as though . . . freight didn't get through, 'ceptin' whiskey and powder . . . livin' fer months off'n a supply Schwind suddenly opens . . . back room of his place. He's into every one of us—and plenty. Prices is worse than Leavenworth ten years ago!"

Bland's forehead ribbed with sudden concern.

"What's the Lucky Lady's tally with Schwind?" he asked.

Quart looked steadily at the floor and many of his words were lost. ". . . done best . . . had to have powder . . . feed fer the muckers I worked in good weather. You won't like the score none. Reckon . . . ask Schwind what it is."

Bill's back straightened until he towered above his little partner. There was no mistaking the agony in Denton's eyes. A heavy shadow was across the Valley of the Pueblos, and Bill Bland knew the man who cast it. His hand went out to rest for

a moment on his old partner's shoulder, then he moved into the doorway and was again on the street.

The crowd which had poured from the bar of Carson's place was again within the building. The throng on the street took no heed of him now. He swung up through the dust in the effortless stride that had gained him the name of *The Cat* among Ninab's Utes.

THE hour was early and the Colorado House was empty. Bill stood in the doorway, calm fingers tucking back the flaps which held secure the pouched Navy Colts at his belt. His eyes played over the great main room. Three or four house men sat at the tables, riffling the cards or idly talking. The barkeep and swamper were busy setting up bottles against the back-bar. Luke Fiddler, top dealer at the Colorado, was sitting in the musicians' pit with his feet on the rail, talking to one of the girls from upstairs.

With Bland's first stride into the room, sound and movement came to a sudden pause. Then Fiddler moved. His feet hit the floor with a crash that Bill could feel through the planking. Bland saw the dealer's lips move in a swift command to the girl. The girl slipped away to the rear, and Bill came on. He stopped on firmly-planted feet, his voice a clanging anvil in the echoing quiet of the room.

"Where's Schwind?" he growled.

Luke Fiddler shrugged. "Sick."

"He'll be a damn sight sicker if he don't show for palaver pronto!"

There was no mistaking the menace of his flat tone nor the cold fury in his eyes. For a long moment Fiddler stood rooted nervously. Then the suavity that was his stock in trade returned, and he spread his hands in an eloquent gesture.

"Maybe you'll wait, Bland?" he asked smoothly. "Name yourself a drink."

Bill's lips tightened. "I came here on business! I'll take my pleasure under another roof than this! Tell Schwind I've come to settle the score Denton ran up on the Lucky Lady!"

Bland started to add something more, but he suddenly realized that someone else was in the room, that Fiddler's gaze was fixed over his shoulder. He spun, crouching a little, and faced Buck Schwind a dozen paces away. A chill swept through him as it had many times on the trail through the past winter. Death could stalk close to a deaf man, and often did.

Schwind was armed. His whole figure hung in a graceless, easy slouch. Cold hatred was in the beady glint of his eyes, but his words came easily to his lips. Bland watched them form.

"Word's travelin' that you went loco up in the hills . . . some folks'll believe that's what was behind your sluggin' me at Carson's. Maybe a yarn about a dippy miner with a yen for a trapper's rep will stick with the town, but not with me . . . talk that out later. You mentioned business, and that comes first!"

Bill nodded grimly. "What you got chalked up against the Lucky Lady for supplies and blasting sticks—for three months?"

Schwind rocked back on his heels with a grin of pleasure.

". . . aim to square . . . in one season . . . must have some cache in the hills! . . . Owes . . . nine thousand. . . ."

BLAND stared in amazement. For a moment he knew the uncertainty that tortures a man who cannot hear. But Schwind repeated the figure. Bill made a rapid calculation. Six of the best years he had spent on the fur trails had not netted him much more than that. He doubted if Kit Carson spent more than this figure to stock his post for the use of the whole town for a year. Color left his face in a flood of bitter resentment. Did the gambler take him for a fool?

"One thousand is twice too much,

Schwind," he snapped. "But I'll pay a thousand, and no more!"

"On account," Schwind corrected carefully. "—with a balance of eight. But not in fur, Bland. I'll take cash or your mine . . . take it or leave it!"

Bill's hands drifted back to the scarred walnut of his Navy grips. "Fur's legal trade through the hills, Schwind," he answered. "You'll take fur and be happy!"

Buck Schwind shook his head. He jerked his hand toward a door. One of his men moved to open it. Within were stacked three bales of beaver. The ties looked strangely familiar. Bill strode across and examined the bales. He straightened slowly and turned toward Schwind. Those bales had been on his own mule when he hit town an hour ago. His gaze grated against that of Schwind and held. The gambler smiled.

"Savvy now, Bland?" he grinned. "Too many furs. That's my trouble. Made a big shipment yesterday. This load will fill me up with the buyers at Santa Fe for the season. I can't take any more!"

Bill took one step forward as he translated the lip movements into words, then paused. The house men had quietly spread until he was fronted by Schwind and Fiddler and flanked by half a dozen others whose tenseness flagged a raw signal to his brain. He let his words shape slowly across his lips, his gaze riveted on the master of the Colorado.

"You're right, Buck," he said quietly. "You can't take any more. Not the way you took those and every other shipment you've made this season! As for the Lucky Lady, that belongs to Denton and his niece as well as to me. We'll fight Schwind! And the mountain men will fight, before they'll let you bleed them to death!"

As the last words cracked into the room, Bill's hands crept back to his guns. Schwind watched the move narrowly, but a smile was on his lips.

"Denton don't bother me," he said. ". . . gal don't, neither. Seen her . . . stage today . . . got plans. . . . I. . . . The trappers won't be trouble with Carson gone. . . ." Schwind paused, then his lips moved slowly, hard with venom. "You won't do —for two reasons. I talked up big how you come at me without reason at Carson's. And men have seen you pass by without an answer to things they've said. . . . You're marked a queer one by the citizens of Taos—and you're marked a dead one by me!"

THE last of Schwind's speech came on a rising crescendo of sound. Bill could not hear that rising warning, but he caught the flush on the other's face and the sudden shuttling of his eyes. Without waiting to glance behind him, Bill dropped to the floor. He rolled, and with the movement, dragged his Colts free. Both of his shoulders slammed against the floor with the drive of the guns as they began to hammer. The slugs tore upward at the men who sought to spring Schwind's trap.

Two men staggered back with their broad silver belt-buckles crushed into torn belly muscles. Another took a slug through his eye and dropped like a stone. A sudden raw banner of red leaped across Schwind's jaw, and he fell back against a table. The other renegades, startled at the death which lashed at them from the floor, fired wildly. One shot was a cold one, neatly placed into Bill's chest. But the pouch of sample from the Lady which he always carried with him robbed the lead of penetration.

Suddenly a wide gap was before him, and he came up from the floor like a striking cougar. Three times more his guns crashed. When they were empty, he dropped them back into leather and sprang forward. With a leap that carried him like a ram against a man who sought to level a scattergun, he was in the clear and sprinting for the door.

In the scant seconds that gun-fire had roared within the building, a crowd had gathered in the street. Bill crashed through it. A man sought to stop him. Hell was loose behind him, and he had no time to study a man's face to read the unheard question. He shook his shoulder, but the fellow clung to him. His left hand moved in an awkward swing that bowled the man over twice.

Then a familiar figure was before him, and beside the figure was a horse and rider. Bill was conscious that old Quart was trying to tell him something, but already a man was firing from the porch of the Colorado House. He shook his head at his partner and seized the leg of the rider in the saddle above him.

But his hand did not close over the corded bulge of a man's calf. Instead, he found he had gripped the soft roundness of a woman's ankle. His eyes raised to the figure above him. He saw the startled, angry face of the girl from the stage, the one Buck Schwind had named as Quart Denton's niece. He tugged gently.

"I want your horse!"

The insistence in his voice seemed to anger the girl. She sought to free his grip with a vicious kick. Back at the Colorado House came the snarl of a rifle, and lead tore over his head. Time was more precious than the pride of an angry girl. His grip tightened, and the girl found herself dragged forcefully from the saddle.

BILL swung up and over, riding the far side of the mount in the fashion of the tribes from the plains. Faces streamed by him and were gone as Bill's heels dug in. The crowd was gone, and in a few moments Taos was behind him. But a phrase was ringing through Bill's brain, a phrase which had tumbled from the lips of a bystander when his eyes were for a moment on the speaker's face.

"It's Denton's partner . . . went crazy in the hills, they say!"

As the mountains to the north came nearer, Bland's mount slowed to a run. He straightened in the saddle. So he was a madman! A madman because Ninab's lip-magic had let him read an insult on the mouth of a man thirty yards away. A madman because he chose to fight when others faltered!

A bitter smile spread over his face. Perhaps he was a little crazy. A man with an impaired sense might easily lose his grip, and there had been little sanity in his fronting Schwind under the beams of the Colorado House.

Ahead were the hills. Only in the hills where silence is eternal may a deaf man find peace. One day, Bland knew, his madness might be legend along the Cimarron —for Schwind was out to gut Taos and the wealth of the rendezvous. But the

gambler would have neither of the two *ladies* which were now the chore of old Quart Denton!

CHAPTER THREE

Mountain Man's Medicine

AN HOUR into the hills, Bland cut off over a steep shoulder, followed a knife-ridge for a few miles, then pitched over into another watershed. In half an hour more, he was hunkered down above the falls of Wet Creek. Here Kit Carson had camped for two days on his first trip into the Cimarron, for from this ridge the Valley of the Pueblos was plainly visible in the lens-like air. The Thunderhead had camped here, studying the Indians in the mud pueblos fringing Taos through a pair of army glasses. Bland had no distance-cutters now, but few men in the Sangre de Cristo had better eyes.

The Valley of the Pueblos was alive with mounted men. They streamed in thin lines toward the hills, the speed of their pace raising tell-tale plumes of dust along the flats. Bland grinned wryly. He wondered if Schwind and his crew would ride so hard to hunt him down if they knew that he was easy prey for a foe that came silently and stayed from sight. He was grateful for the pride that had kept him from revealing his deafness.

Schwind must have been sure of him there in the gambling house to let him see those stolen bales. For though the mountain-men at this rendezvous had taken much, blunt evidence of open theft would draw them together. The boys from the high trails were a strange lot. They were at each other's throats tooth and nail from October to June in the bitter competition of running their lines for a record catch, but once the season was done and the fur trails were behind, the legion was a strongly-welded brotherhood.

Hampered as he was by the gossip which named him a queer one, Bill knew he might yet swing the tide against Schwind. Somewhere stragglers would yet be working in toward Taos. Perhaps even old Quart would come through the hills searching for him. And through one of these, he might get word to the rendezvous in terms that would leave little room for doubt.

Toward sun-down, the riders crossing the floor of the basin came up below him and disappeared into the breaks of the hills. Bland mounted again and swung higher, back over the ridge to the upper courses of the Cimarron. A hard half hour brought him to San Luis Pass. He swung down, led his mount into a deep bosque, and came back to the trail. Here he settled himself against a steep wall which covered both flank and rear approach.

Not long afterward, two men appeared on the trail below. They came up to within a dozen yards of him before they lit down. One was stiff from the hard ride. He straightened dusty town-clothes and growled. Bland watched him carefully as he spoke, and although he missed many words, his training enabled him to fill in the gaps.

"Damn poor business!" the man was saying. "Huntin' a wild man after dark! And I ain't carin' for this spot, either. Just over the hump there, nigh spittin' distance, is where Burdge and me tunneled Bronson and Tipton. Buck was happy over that, but them mangy long-hairs at the post is still waitin' for them two and the biggest catch. It was a nasty job, and they didn't die happy. Hell of a place to have to come back to and pitch down for the night!"

"LISSEN, Mead," the other said, "don't tell it so scary. I ain't holdin' hands with no pilgrim card-man tonight. The Boss said to plug the pass, and she's plugged. Tomorrow the rest of the crew'll

be along and they'll comb that wild man of yourn out of the hills by noon. Buck got careless and let too much out afore that jigger slipped away. Him bein' loco is more talk than anything else, if yuh ask me!"

"Well, loco or not, I'm pullin' both triggers before I shove Bill Bland!" the gambler grunted. "That powder fire he set off in the Colorado ain't nuthin' to what'll blow should he drift back and find Denton in the old stone jail, Buck's men in his mine, and that new gal plumb gone from sight!"

"Ain't it the truth!" the other rider snorted.

The two men took the reins of their mounts and worked back from the trail fifty yards to a break in the timber where they might make camp. With the distance too great for him to make out the movement of their lips, Bill could understand no more of their words. But he had heard enough. Things were rolling fast in town. That Schwind could do what the man had said was more than possible. The huge bill against the Lucky Lady would serve to hold Denton, would even afford an excuse for taking over the mine.

As for the girl, Bill had meant to warn old Quart about her. She was too rich a prize in country such as this. There were men among the legion who would damn their souls to carry her off. And because Schwind had seen and admired her, he would move faster than any.

No longer was there time to cut through the hills in search of stragglers. No longer could he build a fighting crew on the slopes of the hills. There was work to be done in Taos. Kit Carson, ruler of the town and god of the trails, was gone. A lesser man, a man who was no longer the equal of any in the legion, must carry unaided the responsibility that had been the Thunderhead's. Peace must be brought back to the Valley of the Pueblos . . . by mountain-magic, steel and powder, at fatal odds!

FOR half an hour more Bill Bland squatted at his post beside the trail. The men from town made quick bivouac and moved back toward the pass. As they came, Bland rose to meet them. He moved like a shadow, swiftly, without sound. The two Colorado men were utterly unaware of his approach until he suddenly emerged from an aspen clump to face them.

The bigger of the two, the one who had scoffed at his fellow's fear, moved in a reflex of defense. He dropped to an indistinct crouch, his hand flashing upward with a block-barreled derringer. One of the four deadly charges flared out, the heavy powder load blooming brightly from the muzzle in the half-light of dusk. Bland felt the tug of lead against him, but he spun toward the shadows with the mad twist of a sand-flat whirlwind. Twice his Navy pistols snarled, then the renegade dropped his weapon and staggered.

The second man apparently cared little for this brand of fighting, for he was gone into the shadows. Bill snapped a hurried shot after him and turned back to the big man. The derringer lay in the rubble of the trail. The big man towered over it, his face twisted with savage fury. Bill took one step toward him, and the man lunged. They met with an impact that shook Bland from his footing. He had frantic need of both hands, and dropped his guns. But a madman's strength was in his foe.

A great paw closed over Bill's shoulder and clamped like a vise. He felt himself raised and half-flung through the air. The ground looped eerily beneath him, and his shoulder struck against the bole of a scrub cedar across the trail. An explosion of roaring light burned in his brain, and his breath left him in a grunting surge.

He lay motionless a moment, agony coursing through him. Then he clawed

to his feet with a silent, savage curse. More than one man had died this season on the in-trails to Taos—died at the hands of merciless killers such as these sent to seek him out. If the rendezvous was to be freed of the ruthlessness of Buck Schwind, if Rennie Denton was to be saved from the Colorado House and its squalid hell, if the Lucky Lady was to cut on down to silver—Bill knew San Luis Pass must be kept free. It must be a deaf man and not two renegades who rode back to Taos.

THE big man towered in the center of the trail like an upreared grizzly. For a moment admiration surged through Bland. Those first two shots from his own guns must have tallied. Yet the man apparently stood waiting for his foe to strike again. The need of haste was borne again to Bill, and he leaped toward the other with all the driving speed of whip-cord muscles.

The mouth of the big man worked faintly. Bill knew he was saying something, but the movement was jerky and he could not read the words. He hit the Colorado House man low, carried him soddenly to the ground. But even as he struck, he knew a dead man lay beneath him. Again Bill felt that wave of admiration for the cold animal courage of the man. He had stood facing a foe on the trail and had died uncomplainingly, deserted by the man sent to help him, and drilled cleanly through by two huge Navy slugs.

Bill rolled the big man clear of the trail, tossed his derringer into the brush, and retrieved his own weapons. A quick glance at the bivouac the two renegades had set up revealed both horses still in the timber. The gambler who had deserted his fellow was still somewhere close. This was the sort of situation Bill had always feared since the loss of his hearing. The gambler was not one to walk out and face a foe. A shot in the back, from close cover, was more to his style. And when such a foe is close and unseen, hell comes to roost with a man who cannot hear.

Bill knew that with the big man dead, the gambler was not likely to remain and try to plug the pass. Stragglers to the rendezvous would make across the Ute all right now.

BILL drove in a crouching run for the renegade camp. His own horse was loosely tethered and well hidden. By morning the animal would work free and drift back to town of its own accord. Making away with both mounts at the bivouac would end the threat of the man hidden in the shadows. But as Bill Bland drove into the aspen clump flanking the camp, death reached eagerly for him again.

A sudden darting shadow raced across his vision from above. Before he could realize what this threat might be, a rawhide noose had tightened about his throat. The rope cut mercilessly into the straining cords of his neck. Above him, a thin grin on his face, the disheveled figure of the gambler crouched in a high notch of the biggest tree in the clump. The rope was half-hitched about one branch of the notch, and using the other as a purchase, the gambler was hoisting him slowly into the air.

A sharp chill cut through Bill Bland, then a hot wave of fury. This was what he had feared—something quick and silent which might strike before he could see its danger. Blood pounded a fierce, frantic drum-beat in his temples. His lungs writhed for the air he could not draw past the tightening noose. The thought that he was done, that he was at trail's end, beat tonelessly through him. But stronger still, more insistent, was a grim will to live.

His hands reached up to seize the narrow ribbon of that deadly riata. Steel fingers that could spread the jaws of a wolf-trap curled into the leather. His shoulders surged. His whole body writhed

upward, and the tension about his neck slackened a little. One hand sought a new grip further up the rope. Then he was moving upward, still fighting for air.

His bulging eyes fastened on the man above. The gambler's face was bloodness now. Not until Bill was safe in the crotch, not until he had torn the leather from his tortured neck, did the gambler realize what faced him. He made a futile stab beneath his coat for the gun he had lost when he fled from the fight, gave a startled, pleading squawk as Bland seized him.

The mountain-man's fury was still hot within him. A chopping, back-handed blow across the gambler's face drove all whimpering fight from him. The noose fell easily over the gambler's head, and with a powerful shove Bill sent the man tumbling into space. He felt the tug of weight against the limb on which he stood as the rawhide stopped that headlong fall below him. He saw the blurred ribbon of leather twang its death-song as the slack jerked out.

Then Bland swung down the other side of the tree, and made his way to his own mount. Now he must ride on to Taos.

CHAPTER FOUR

Guns of Doom

IT WAS an hour after sun-up when Bill Bland rode into the main street of Taos. Already the towering bulks of the two pueblos swarmed with Indians. In the low-roofed section, where the whites slept off the effects of whiskey and late hours, silence reigned.

There had been time for thought and uncertainty on the long ride in, but Bill had only strengthened his decision. Hot impatience was in him to start this fight in Taos and be done with it. With Rennie Denton and the Lucky Lady both at stake, as well as the interests of the buckskin legion, he knew no one man could hope for luck enough to last him through. And because he needed the oldster's salty courage and cool shooting-eye, he rode first for the stone jail and old Quart.

The block building was in a draw behind Carson's post, two hundred yards from the main street. The Thunderhead had built the jail to subdue the effects of his Taos Lightning on the wild men from the hills. It was little better than a tight shelter, and Bland looked for no trouble in freeing his partner.

But he had not counted on the thoroughness with which Buck Schwind had taken over the town. He cut off the main street just short of the pueblos, crested in a small rise—and pulled up short. The jail lay ahead, but before it, rifles across their arms, paced two men. For an instant Bland hesitated. The two guards stared at him with the same slack look of surprise that was on his own face.

Then he sank steel into his mount and plunged ahead. It was a cold hand to play, but there was no other. The gun of one of the guards spoke—a hasty shot that tore a gouge of 'dobe from the rear wall of Carson's post. For an instant Bland wished that the Thunderhead himself were asleep within the post, that the shot would rouse him out with his deadly guns to join in the work ahead. But Kit was still in the San Luis with General Fremont.

Bill's guns came up out of leather, and he let his mount take its own course. He fired mechanically, and his shots laced close. One of the guards broke for the shelter of the post. Bill half turned in the saddle, aimed carefully and fired. The man's gun coughed into the ground spasmodically, his hands flew high, and he dove forward on his face.

The second guard held his ground, firing his muzzle-loader from the hips. Bill felt lead tug at his sleeve. As he left the saddle, almost at the jail's door, he felt an

agonizing tear at the taut cords under his arm. He grunted relief that the slug had been low enough to miss the shoulder-blade.

Then the ground was under his feet, and the guard's face before him. He jerked his gun up, brought it down on the guard's head. The fellow grunted, fell back against the building, and slid into the dust.

Already a clamor of alarm was beating up from the street beyond Carson's post. Bill could measure the turmoil that raged there by the haze of dust that rose under scurrying feet. He bent swiftly and hooked a huge key from the fallen guard's belt. The door before him was shaking in its frame as he stuck the key in the lock. He spun the key and stepped back.

QUART DENTON tumbled out. His jailers had been hard on him, for he had been an unwilling prisoner. His clothes were tattered, his face was pinched with pain, and he limped heavily on one foot. There was a nasty gouge along the side of his head, and one eye was closed.

"By hell, son!" old Quart yelped wildly. "Yuh made it! Shove one of them irons of yourn into my paw! Hell's cheap to what Buck Schwind's done asked for!"

Bill followed the lip movements of the old man's challenging roar with difficulty. A sharp furrow creased his brow, and he seized the other's arm.

"The girl?" he asked quickly.

"The guards said she's at Schwind's cabin with six men standin' guard outside!" the oldster shot back. "They said she'd be well taken care of. And there's a crew in the mineshaft, and they've got down to our pay-dirt! We got a chore, Bill!"

"Rennie first!" Bill clipped. "Then we'll take care of the Lucky Lady and Buck Schwind!"

Denton grunted and swung up behind Bill on his horse. Bending low over the horn, they shot at an angle across the draw and came out on the main street half-way between the Colorado House and Buck Schwind's cabin. Quart let out a yelp as they hit the paved clay of the street.

"Watch for lead from any angle!" he warned. "Half the town figgers you turned loco, and some is apt to crack down on yuh!"

Bill could not make out what the other was saying, but he understood the warning. His eyes were fastened on the front of Schwind's cabin. The crew that surrounded it seemed to understand what the double-laden horse meant, and they opened fire. A moment later, a cross volley broke from the shuttered windows of the Colorado House. Lead whipped about the riders, so close that Bill could feel its beat in the air about him.

A dozen yards from the cabin, riding full into the face of the fire from the men stationed there, Bland's mount ran into a slug and died on its feet. Bland rolled over twice from the crashing horse and came up to find Quart Denton still at his side. His gun rose in his hand, and a gout of flame lashed from it. He felt the concussion of old Quart's gun beside him. He saw two of the men before Schwind's cabin drop.

BLAND veered to one side and fired again, tallying another guard. Then he saw a face at the window behind the renegades. The face was that of the girl who had stepped down from the stage, the girl Buck Schwind had sworn he would put on the second floor of the Colorado House. With a hoarse yell at Denton to hold his fire, Bland plunged forward.

A slug howling down from the gambling house knocked Bland flat. He fired the last chamber of his gun from the dust, saw a man stagger and fall. He clawed himself up and leaped against the two remaining guards. They fired almost in unison. But he was weaving from side to side, and both were misses. He hit the

two together like a charging bull, and all three went down in a snarled tangle.

One of the two was a breed who understood this manner of fighting. He fastened a grimy thumb deep under the frontal bone of Bill's eye and gouged savagely. Bill fought as grimly as the other. His back curled and his legs thrashed. Caught off guard, the breed's body slipped between the trap-like spread of Bill's legs. He brought the bone-grating force of a vise crushing against the other. The breed writhed and beat the ground in agony, seeking to free himself.

But Bland was inexorable. The pressure increased while he sought to trip up the other guard who was hammering at Quart Denton with a gun butt. Twice the old man went down under those sledging blows, but he rose grimly each time. Then the guard shoved the gun forward like a spear, catching the oldster in the midsection. Quart crumpled and lay still. The fellow stepped back to watch his victim, and Bland's white-knuckled hands closed about his ankles.

DUST spurted from under Bland's shoulders as he tugged and shoved upward. Biting pain shot through the wound under his arm. The man with the gun turned half over in the air and came plunging head first to the ground. His head twisted unnaturally to one side and he lay still, half across the fallen form of Quart Denton. Bland turned once more to the man in the grip of his legs, but the breed had ceased to struggle. He opened his legs then, and the fellow rolled limply away.

Bland squirmed to his feet. He smashed the door before him with his shoulder and swung the portal open. Rennie Denton stood within the door, white-faced and trembling, a cleaver from the kitchen in her hands. Three shoddy Navajo women were crowded fearfully against the far wall. Disregarding those who had been her jailers, the girl's eyes riveted on Bill Bland. For a moment she stared. Then a gasp tore from her lips.

"The man from the hills!" she cried. "The madman! Get back!"

Bill had no time to explain. His voice was rough with urgency.

"Your uncle's hurt!" he snapped. "Give me some help!"

For a moment longer the girl stood poised with the deadly cleaver ready in her hand. Then she saw Quart Denton staggering to his feet beyond the door. She raced to him, and Bill was right behind her. Old Quart was out of the fight and needed attention.

Bill glanced quickly over his shoulder. A squad of men was moving at a rapid clip from the Colorado House, Buck Schwind in the lead.

The girl started to speak, but Bill whirled away. He snatched up a pair of guns from the fallen renegades. Then he strode mechanically into the street to face Schwind and his crew.

Schwind paused when he saw the lone man turn to face him. Then his lips parted in a wolfish snarl, and came on with his pack. Bill felt a sudden weariness creeping over him. At the window of a little Mexican cantina, he saw the face of a trapper who had once been his friend. A new bitterness welled within him. Not even his friends would side him to clear the town of a menace that threatened them as well as him. The trapper caught the steel of his gaze, and his lips moved in explanation. Bill could not read the words, but suddenly he understood. Schwind had taken no chances. The legion had been disarmed!

The distance between himself and the renegades was short when they opened fire against him. One leg was driven from under him, and he fell to his knees. His own guns were leaping in his hands now, and each cap measured a man. But lead was ripping through him again. A

slug tore along his ribs, robbing one whole side of him of strength.

Buck Schwind stood clearly before him, a muzzle-loader leveled in his hands. Bill fired fast—faster, till the sound of his gun was one steady roar. Schwind's hand closed on the trigger just as Bland's slugs hit him, sent him backward. Schwind's gun bloomed a giant crest of smoke and something exploded within Bill's head. Oblivion came as he slid to the ground, an oblivion he fought bitterly —for his job was not yet done. . . .

A STRANGE thought hammered at Bill as consciousness came back to him. Nothing was final, it seemed—not even death. Had life returned to give him one last chance to finish the thing he had started? Then he knew that the battle was settled—and because he had failed, renegades who still rule the town.

He fought to open his eyes, but found they were tightly bandaged. Then he was conscious of movement about him. and words were in the air—a voice softer than the whisper of pines.

"He'll live?" it pleaded. "Somebody tell me he'll live! My Uncle and I need him—we *all* need his courage! We called him mad because he did not answer what was spoken to him. But he fought this out alone—our fight—with a foe he could never hear!"

Another voice, a voice that rang out like a trumpet-call, answered. "Ease up, Miss Denton," it counseled. "I've known Bill Bland for years. He's got a nasty rip alongside his head and a few breather holes in him, but he'll be on his feet in a week. He wouldn't look so bad now if I hadn't covered most of his head with that bandage. He'll come around. And the next time I leave my reservation, Bill Bland will wear spurs on this town for me! You can take my word for that, Miss. And Kit Carson's word is as good as law in Taos!"

Bill stirred. Something was wrong. His eyes were covered, yet he understood words! That congestion in his head, that aching thing the winter pneumonia had left behind, was gone! The impact of that bullet against his head had shocked his hearing back into working order, and Kit had returned to side him!

He raised his hand to his head, tore the bandage from his eyes. A sudden picture was before him as the cloth fell away. A sea of faces pressed about him eagerly. Rennie Denton's was close to him. Old Quart's was there, too—and so was Kit Carson's.

Spurs to rod Taos, Kit had promised. And the Lucky Lady was down to the lode. Bill Bland sank back and closed his eyes. He felt a soft, warm hand over his brow—Rennie's hand!

THE END

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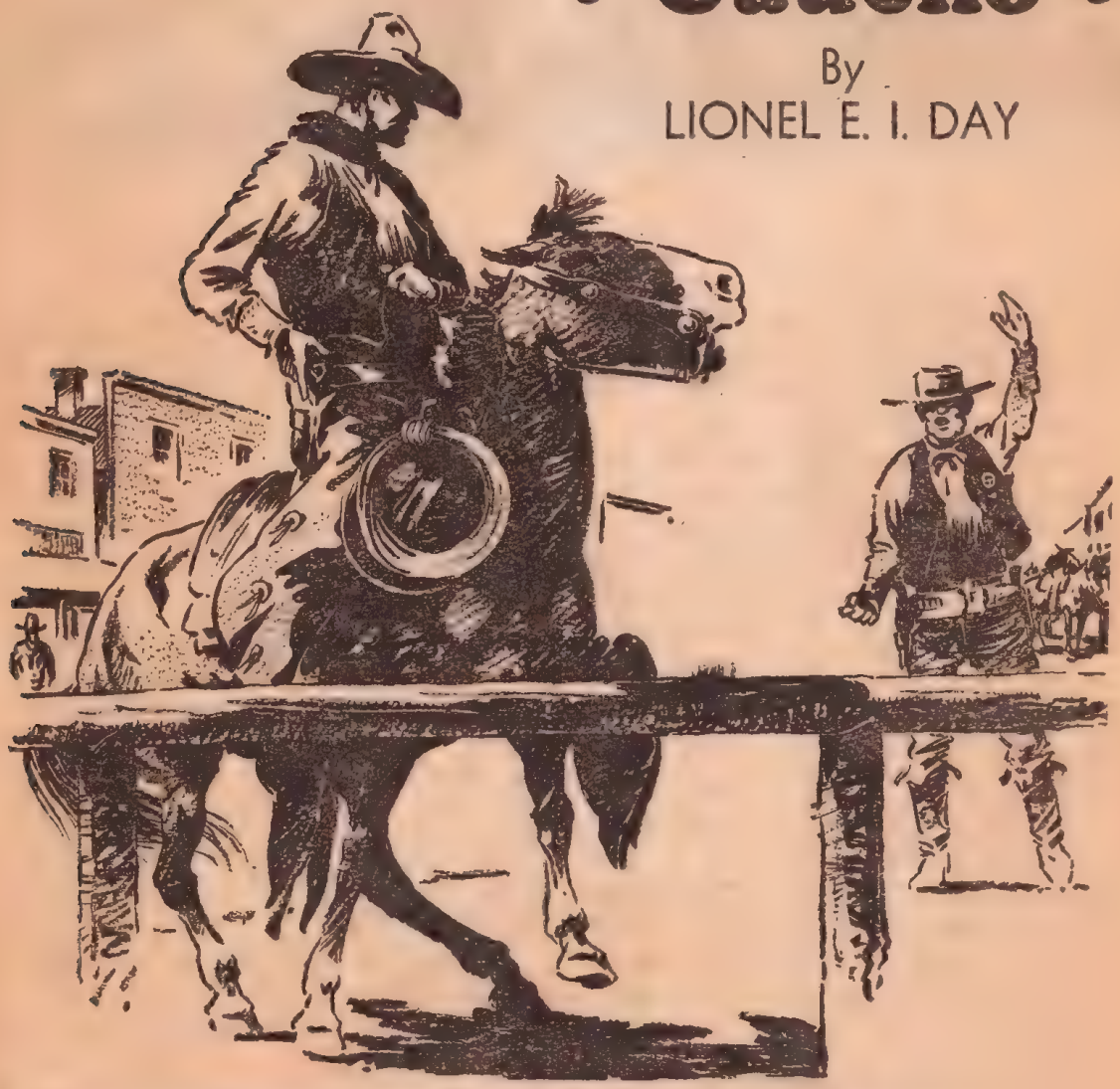

Without warning, Brannigan struck spurs to his mount and the animal plunged forward. . . .

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That gold watch charm in old Ute Jones' dead fingers meant disgrace for the sheriff and a hangman's noose for Luke Long ... unless Doc Jim August, fighting frontier sawbones, could figure why the deadliest killer in Arizona threw lead first and died.

DOCTOR JIM AUGUST came to his feet abruptly when he glanced out of his office window and saw Sheriff Mat Ronson marching down the middle of Gaucho's main street with that peculiar, stiff-legged gait, which meant trouble. Coming from the opposite direction was a rider mounted on a lathered paint horse. Even from a distance, August recognized the hunched, ape-like shoulders of Dice Brannigan, and he whistled

softly through his teeth and he reached for his "gun fever" kit of medical paraphernalia.

Outside, people on the board sidewalks stopped to watch for a few seconds, then moved hurriedly into the nearest doorway. Customers scurried from stores to unhitch their horses and move them to safer side streets. Every citizen of Gaucho knew what to expect when pugnacious, rock-jawed old Sheriff Ronson began one of his stiff-legged marches down main street. Dice Brannigan knew, too, and he reined up uncertainly when he caught sight of the fighting old lawman.

August held his breath when he saw Ronson's lips move in a command. Brannigan's brutal face split in a mocking grin as he answered. There weren't a dozen men in the state of Arizona who could match the flashing speed of Dice Brannigan's draw, and for months the law abiding citizens had been dreading the showdown that they knew must come between Ronson and the cold-blooded gun-shark.

August waited, tensely. It seemed for a few seconds to be a stalemate, then something happened that brought an oath of alarm bursting from his lips. Without warning, Brannigan struck spurs to his mount and the animal plunged forward. Ronson tried to sidestep, but the spooked animal sent him sprawling. Brannigan flipped his gun into line and the thunder of shots reached August's ears. He was about to close his eyes on the spectacle of his best friend's death, when Ronson came to one knee with a heavy Peacemaker in each hand. Spears of flame shot from his gun muzzles. Brannigan clawed at his chest and his lips drew away from his teeth in a grimace of mortal agony before he toppled from the saddle. The sheriff got to his feet and strode away without looking back.

With a sigh of relief, August picked up his kit, hung a "Back in Half Hour" sign on the door, and moved out onto the street. He shoved through the crowd that had gathered around Brannigan's body, and made a quick examination. It was unnecessary, as he had known it would be. Brannigan was drilled dead-center. The dead man's face was flushed and the pupils of his eyes were enormously dilated. August lifted a partly emptied flask of whiskey from his chaps pocket and transferred it to his own. He would need it later for evidence at the inquest.

"Brannigan made a mistake," he muttered, half to himself. "He must have been drunk or he'd never have tried to get Ronson from the back of a spooked bronc."

"He's a fool, Ronson is! Fowler ain't gonna set by an' see his top-hand loan collector planted in boothill. Somebody's gonna pay for this, an' pronto!"

August turned to see the speaker. It was tall, cadaverous Jiggs Edsen, a lunger who eked a living as swamper at the Keno Palace. There was a knowing leer on his skull-like features.

"You may be right," August snapped, "but Ronson never killed a man that didn't need it, and there are plenty folks who'll stand by him."

"Then them folks better watch out, too!" Edsen croaked, ending with a wracking cough that brought a grimace of pain to his face.

August pushed through the crowd without answering, and headed toward the sheriff's office. A frown of worry clouded his brow. There was truth in Edsen's dire predictions, and he feared for the old lawman's safety. Toby Fowler was the town loan shark who preyed on small ranchers and nesters, loaning them money at exorbitant rates on little or no security. He relied on brutal, gun wranglers like Brannigan to collect when the notes fell due, and flourished because the Cattlemen's National was always taxed to the limit in financing the big beef syndicates of the local range. There was

rarely enough liquid capital left for the small operators, and they were literally forced into Fowler's parlor.

Halfway across the street, August paused as a buggy drew up in front of him. He doffed his hat when he recognized the slim, gingham clad girl who held the reins.

"MARTHA LONG!" he said, grinning delightedly. "You're lookin' prettier every time I see you."

She answered his smile, but there was a shadow of worry in the liquid brown depths of her eyes.

"Doctor Jim, I've been looking for you. Could you come to the house right away? Luke is feeling poorly."

"Luke, huh," August echoed without enthusiasm. "What's that brother of yours been up to now?"

She met his gaze bravely, but her lips trembled and her hand fluttered to her throat.

"I honestly don't know, Doctor Jim, but I'm afraid it's something serious this time. He was out all last night, and when he came home he was sick and pale as a ghost."

August nodded, and said soothingly: "I wouldn't fret none about him if I was you. Probably just somethin' he ate. I'll drop by as soon as I finish a little business with the sheriff."

"Thank you—and hurry!"

He watched her drive away and smiled softly as the late afternoon sun made a bright halo of her gleaming auburn hair. They had known each other a long time. August believed in his heart that if not for Martha's scapegrace brother, Luke, they could mean more—much more to each other. Martha had been a mother to Luke since their parents died ten years before, and she still supported him with her dressmaking though he was eighteen now, and well able to shift for himself.

He found Sheriff Ronson slumped morosely in his battered chair, chin in hand. The old man nodded soberly as August sat in the only other chair in the dusty office.

"Brannigan's dead," August told him, "and it was plumb suicide. He must have been drunk or he wouldn't have been so foolish. What did you want him for, anyway?"

"It's puzzlin' me, too. His slugs missed me by feet, an' I never saw Brannigan so drunk he couldn't shoot straight, spooked bronc or no spooked bronc. I wanted him for murder. He killed Ute Jones this mornin'. Found the poor old codger all stove up an' shot in the back over by Big Tom. Found this in his hand."

He tossed a pair of gold-mounted dice on the desk, and August examined them briefly.

"Brannigan's watch fob," grunted August. "Never saw another like it in my life."

At that moment there was a scuffling of boots on the boardwalk outside and three men came through the door. August looked up curiously, then leaped to his feet with his hand midway to his holster. He recognized Hat Miles, mayor of Gaucho, Toby Fowler, and Ronson's deputy, Orrin Paige. The three held drawn guns trained on Ronson! Hat Miles spoke first, and his rugged face bore the expression of one about to perform a distasteful duty.

"MAT RONSON," he said gruffly, "I'm askin' you to surrender peaceful. Fowler is accusin' you of murderin' Dice Brannigan. Claims you badgered him into a fight, then killed him. There ain't a jury in the world that'd convict you for riddin' the earth o' such vermin, but if Fowler can back his claims, you'll have to stand trial."

Complete, overwhelming astonishment seemed to grip Ronson as he looked from one to the other.

"It was a fair fight," he gasped. "I tried to arrest Brannigan for killin' Ute Jones, an' he chose to draw. He got his chance to give himself up, but he tried to beat my gun time instead."

Fowler's fat, florid cheeks quivered indignantly. "You made a mistake this time, you dodderin' old fool! Brannigan never set foot out of my office till fifteen minutes ago, an' I can prove it. An' besides, everybody knows you ain't took a prisoner alive in five years. It's time someone put a stop to your high-handed gun ramroddin' o' this town!"

Hat Miles shrugged his huge shoulders apologetically. "Can you prove Brannigan murdered Jones?" he asked hopefully.

"I sure can!" Ronson stormed, surging to his feet. "I found this fob in Ute's hand, an' if it ain't Brannigan's I'll eat it!"

"Start eatin', then!" Fowler squeaked triumphantly. "Luke Long won that from Brannigan last night in a game over at the Keno Palace! At least a dozen men saw him win it!"

August's breath burst sibilantly through his teeth as he heard Luke Long's name, and Ronson sank back into his chair, shaking his head dazedly.

"If that's true," he said slowly, seeming to age years, "then I killed an innocent man, an' Luke Long's due for a hangin'!"

Orrin Paige stepped forward then. His face was expressionless, but his hand shook as he unpinned the star from Ronson's shirt and took possession of the old lawman's guns. It was the only visible sign of emotion that August guessed must be seething in his breast. Ronson had picked Paige up when he was a down-and-out drifter, made a law dog of him, and had given him something to live for. Arresting his benefactor, the one man who had faith in him, was a bitter dose of medicine for him to take. Fowler turned on August suddenly as Paige and Ronson moved slowly toward the cell block.

"The whole town knows you're sweet on Luke's pretty sister," he said with a forced smile, "so I'm givin' you some advice. Stick to your pills an' stay outta this if you want to stay healthy, Doc August!"

August jammed clenched fists into his pockets and forced himself to keep from smashing Fowler's unctuous face.

"I don't know what you're up to, fat man, but from past history I'll gamble that it's crooked as hell! Meantime, thanks for the warnin'. I'll be careful not to turn my back on any of your yellow striped gun crew!"

He strode out of the office and headed up the street. A worried frown creased his brow as he walked hurriedly with the tails of his frock coat whipping out behind him in the wind. By the time he reached Martha Long's neat little dress-making shop, his face was set grimly. Martha herself answered his knock, and a relieved smile touched her lips when she saw him.

"I've been waiting for you, Doctor Jim. Luke feels better now, but—"

"I'd like to talk to Luke," August growled. "There'll be a couple of other gents comin' to see him in a few minutes. You better tell 'em he hasn't come home yet."

Martha's hand flew to her lips, and alarm showed in her dark eyes as she looked up at him.

"He's in trouble! I can see it in your face!"

"Nothin' that can't be fixed if he's sensible. Where is—"

"Stickin' your nose in other folks' business again, Doc?"

LUKE shoved Martha aside and faced August with a scowl of dislike on his full-lipped young face. He looked shaken and sick, and his clothes were disheveled. August flushed and reined down hard on his temper.

"You better come with me, Luke. By the back way, if you can guess why."

Luke shrugged unconcernedly, but his wide blue eyes were apprehensive as they probed August's.

"You're wastin' your time," he sneered. "I wouldn't let you help me if I was breathin' my last."

"Luke!" Martha exclaimed. "Don't talk like that. Doctor Jim's your friend. He only wants you to do what's best for you."

August turned casually and looked over his shoulder. Fowler and Paige were coming toward the house, walking with purposeful speed. Luke saw them, too, and backed hurriedly out of the doorway.

"All right, Doc. I'll go with you, an' we better hurry at that."

August followed him through the neat little shop, and out the back door. When they reached the alley, Luke swung beside him and said surlily: "If you're goin' to lecture me again on livin' a decent life an' stayin' away from the Keno Palace, you can save your—"

"You're wanted for murder, Luke. Anything I'm doin' for you is on account of your sister. You can go plumb to blazes for all I care, except it would break Martha's heart."

Luke's eyes flew wide with stunned surprise and he was silent after that. When they reached the rear of his office, August unlocked the door and they stepped into the gloomy back room. He indicated a packing crate, and Luke sank onto it wearily.

"Talk!" August ordered. "We haven't much time. Did you kill Ute Jones?"

Luke shook his head in bewilderment. "Why should I do that?"

"I'm askin' the questions, an' you better give me straight answers if you want to keep your neck out of a noose! The watch fob you won from Brannigan was found in Ute's hand. Fowler and Paige are lookin' for you, an' if I read Paige's face right, he'll shoot first an' ask questions after."

"All right, Doc. I'll tell you all I know," Luke said wearily. "You got a drink around?"

August was about to say no, when he remembered the flask he had taken from Brannigan's body. He produced it and handed it to Luke.

"This is state's evidence," he said with a grim smile, "but I guess a little of it won't be missed."

Luke tilted the bottle to his lips and took several deep swallows. He made a wry face, then started talking.

"I might have known Fowler would get me somehow. He offered me a hundred in silver to burn down Ute Jones' barn so the old man would have to borrow more money from him. I said no and told him I'd see him in jail if he did that to Ute. Then he swore he'd get me for not doin' the job for him. Last night at the Keno Palace, I sat in on a game with Brannigan. The cards started runnin' my way, an' he was cleaned out. He put his dice watch fob up against twenty, an' I won. I don't remember much after that. Must of passed out, 'cause we was soppin' up plenty red-eye. I woke up this mornin' locked in a back room, but I pried the window open with my knife an' got out. That's the whole story, Doc. I swear it!"

August tugged thoughtfully at his lower lips for a moment, then he said with sudden decision: "You're in a bad spot, Luke. You've got to give yourself up. Paige will kill you for gettin' Sheriff Ronson in trouble, an' if he doesn't Fowler will. You know too much to suit that overstuffed pack rat. He'd squirm if you ever live to talk in a courtroom!"

Luke came to his feet, his blue eyes ablaze. His hand jerked toward his gun.

"I WAS beginnin' to think maybe I had you all wrong!" he stormed, "but if you think I'm gonna stick my head

in a noose, you're crazy! Any ranny who wants to toss me in a calaboose better come a-shootin'!"

"You'll go to jail even if I have to puncture your gizzard, you slick-eared young fool!" August growled. "That's the only place Fowler can't get at you. If you roam free, he'll—"

Luke's palm smacked against the butt of his gun in a swift movement. August made no move toward his own weapon as Like's gun lined unwaveringly on his shirt front.

"So long, Doc!" Luke grinned sarcastically. "I'm high-tailin' it for a healthier climate, an' if you make a move to—to—"

He broke off, staring fixedly at August. His face blanched and suddenly his gun began to tremble uncontrollably.

"Get goin', then," August said, bitingly. "An' you better run."

The gun dropped from Luke's palsied fingers. He dug his knuckles into his eyes frantically.

"Doc!" he half-sobbed. "Doc! I can't see! I'm goin' blind! You got to help me!"

"What!"

The word burst from August's lips as he sprang to Luke's side. Luke clutched at him hysterically.

"It's like I was lookin' through a curtain. Everythin's blurred. Help me, Doc—I'm goin' blind!"

"Whoa! Take it easy," August soothed him. "It ain't possible. You're a healthy young—"

The words died on his lips as Luke turned wide, blankly staring eyes at him. In sudden haste, August struck a match. His own eyes squinted against the glare of the flame, but Luke's didn't. The pupils remained tremendously dilated. A thrill of horror coursed August's spine, for he seemed suddenly to be staring into a dead man's eyes—*the eyes of Dice Brannigan!* For a long moment he stood rigid, with cold sweat beading his forehead. Then the pain of the match-flame searing his fingers snapped him back to reality. He picked up the whiskey bottle that Luke, and previously, Brannigan, had drunk from. He tasted the contents cautiously.

"Belladonna!" he gasped, recognizing the slightly bitter taste. "That's why Brannigan couldn't shoot straight. He couldn't see clearly!"

"You mean somebody put that stuff in Brannigan's liquor, an' it made him blind?"

"Not blind. An overdose o' belladonna paralyzes the eye muscles so that your eyes won't focus. The effect wears off after a while, an' no real harm is done unless you take a lot more than there is in that bottle."

"But you're the only man in town who could have such stuff."

"Me, an' one other," August said grimly. "I—"

A loud knock sounded on the front door. August held up a warning hand.

"Reckon that's someone lookin' for you," he whispered. "Stay here an' I'll head 'em off."

HE helped Luke to a cot in the corner of the room, then hurried to the front of the office. Paige and Fowler were at the door, and he let them in.

"Somethin' I can do for you gents?" he asked.

"Yeah!" Fowler snapped, elbowing past. "You can tell us where Luke Long is hidin'."

August put on a convincing show of innocence. "The last I seen of him, he was headed outta town."

"Where was he goin'?" Paige demanded.

"He said somethin' about ridin' out to Ute Jones' place. Figured he might find somethin' that'd clear him if he looked hard enough."

"To Ute's place!" Fowler echoed in

sudden agitation. "We got to head him off. I'm holdin' you responsible, Paige. We gotta have a posse."

"You seem powerful anxious to keep Luke from gettin' to Ute's ranch," August said evenly.

Fowler moved hastily toward the door. "I'm not. Luke's a murderer an' he's got to be caught. Come on, Paige. There ain't no time left for gabbin'."

They left, and August stared after them thoughtfully. He was beginning to feel like a blindfolded man in a nest of rattlers. Of one thing he was certain, however. The lives of Ronson, his oldest friend, and Luke, the brother of the one woman in the world who mattered to him were at stake. He was still lost in thought when, minutes later, a posse thundered up the street with Fowler and Paige at its head. He straightened suddenly as he saw that every one of Fowler's crew of gunmen was riding in the posse. They would be out of town for hours if they rode to Ute Jones' ranch. It was a break he had scarcely hoped for!

THE moon was floating above the eastern horizon when Doc August locked his office for the night. Luke was still in the back room, sleeping off the dose of opium August had given him as an antidote for the drugged liquor. August reached Fowler's office, then he paused and cast a quick, seemingly casual glance around. Satisfied that his movements were unobserved, he ducked into the narrow alley that flanked the frame building. A back-room window was just over his head, and he pressed his palms against the sill. It opened noisily, and with pounding heart, he boosted himself inside. He stood for an instant in the dark, listening intently. No sound reached his ears, and he concluded that Fowler had left no guards. He struck a match, and by its flickering light made out a desk and a row of wooden filing cabinets. On the desk was an oil lamp, and he moved toward it after carefully closing the window shutters. The wick spluttered, then took, and he looked around him. He was in Fowler's private office. A smile of satisfaction touched his lips.

The desk drawer was locked, but he succeeded in prying it open with his clasp knife. He reached eagerly for the dog-eared journal it contained. He flipped the pages, letting his eyes run down the pen-written entries. Fowler believed in system, and every transaction he made, however insignificant, was meticulously recorded. A thrill of trumph shot through him when he read the previous day's entries. There were two; one concerning five hundred dollars paid to Dice Brannigan for "services", and the two hundred dollars paid to Jiggs Edsen for the same reason.

He started on the files next, and as he searched hurriedly through the folders, he found the notes of a score of small ranchers. The terms Fowler had made in issuing the loans brought a flush of anger to his face. Unbelievably usurious rates, full mortgages as security for a few hundred dollars, fifty percent of the fall beef crop—Fowler was inhumanly expert in getting a death grip on the small rancher's throat. He came to Ute Jones' folder and opened it. Inside were mortgage papers, a neatly drawn map of the property, and a letter that brought a frown of bewilderment to his brow when he read it. It was from the county assayer, to Fowler, stating that the recently submitted ore sample contained forty percent silver. August gasped. Ore of such richness was fabulous! With trembling fingers, he picked up the map of Ute Jones' outfit. On it, about a mile from the ranch house, was drawn a red circle labelled "outcropping."

He understood, then. Ute had found silver on his property, and Fowler knew it! A glance at the mortgage papers told him that Fowler could, and undoubtedly

would foreclose on the morrow! That was why Brannigan had been paid to kill Jones —to prevent his making the final payment on his mortgage. And Fowler, with his usual shrewdness, had planned to kill several birds with one stone. He had framed Luke because he knew too much, probably figuring to kill him rather than allow him to be taken alive. He had gotten Sheriff Ronson out of the way temporarily because he feared the old lawman's stubborn ability for ferreting out crookedness. Ronson had blocked a number of Fowler's shady deals before, and this time he dared take no chances. He had even contrived so that Brannigan's lips would be sealed forever by having him leave his own watch fob in Jones' hand, supposedly to implicate Luke, but actually to betray them both. For if the ace gunman's liquor hadn't been doped, his lightning draw and deadly accuracy would have certainly finished Ronson!

A hacking cough sounded from behind him at that moment. He whirled, and his hand froze halfway to his holster. Edsen was leaning casually in the doorway, but there was nothing casual about the gun that jutted from his skinny fist!

"MAKES interestin' readin', don't it, Doc?" he drawled.

"I figured you was mixed up in this," August said tensely. "You're the only man in town I ever prescribed belladonna an' opium for. Fowler paid you to dope both Luke an' Brannigan, didn't he?"

Edsen straightened and his cadaverous features turned sickly white. "You're smart," he gritted. "Too damn smart to live. Stand an' take it, Doc!"

There could be no doubting his intent. His skinny finger crooked around the trigger, and he drew careful bead. With desperate speed, August seized the oil lamp and hurled it with all his strength. Edsen ducked and the blast of his gun echoed the crash of broken glass. August's hand sped to his gun. He thumbed one careful shot. Edsen fired, too, but August's lead got to its mark first. With a choking gasp, the lunger sank to the floor.

A sudden flare of light illuminated the room as the kerosene from the broken lamp caught fire. Within a few seconds, the front room became an inferno. Then, from outside, Jim heard a hoarse shout of alarm, and the thunder of many hooves. The posse had returned! A quick look convinced him that escape through the door was impossible. Already the fire had spread across the entire front of the building, igniting the sun-dried planks as though they were oil-soaked. Coughing from the dense smoke, he dragged Edsen's body to the window and dumped it out. He followed quickly, and by the time he reached the street, the posse had become a fire-fighting brigade. Fowler led them, filling a bucket at the watering trough and dousing the contents on the smoking office front. He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw August.

"You did this!" he howled, aiming a trembling finger. "You wanted to ruin me but you won't get away with it! Kill him, men! Kill him!"

Flames burst through the roof then, illuminating the entire scene with a ruddy glare. August's right hand swept the tails of his coat clear of his gun butt, but at that moment a tall, gaunt figure elbowed through the possemen. It was Deputy Sheriff Paige. There was a bitter, determined look on his face.

"I'm arrestin' you for helpin' a criminal escape," he said to August. "You sent us on a wild goose chase so Luke could get away."

"If you want to arrest somebody, arrest that killer!" August snapped.

Fowler began to back away in sudden alarm. His pudgy hands opened and closed nervously.

"You're crazy!" he gasped. "You got nothin' on me."

August produced several sheets of paper from his pocket.

"Are you denyin' you paid Brannigan to kill Jones so's he couldn't pay off his mortgage, an' you could foreclose? You wanted his property 'cause you knew he'd found a silver bonanza on it."

A mutter of excitement burst from the lips of the crowd at the mention of silver. Fowler's eyes bulged as he stared at the papers in August's hands.

"You're lyin'!" he croaked.

"An' how about you payin' Edsen to dope Brannigan so's he'd get killed sure?"

Fowler shook his head in sudden terror, and his knees seemed about to buckle under him. August shrugged.

"Then there's nothin' for me to do but turn the map an' receipts over to Paige."

"Stop!"

HIGH-pitched and hysterical, the word exploded from Fowler's lips. His hands slapped down on gun butts with surprising speed, and he began firing almost before his weapons cleared leather. August rocked backward on his heels as lead smashed through his left arm. He made a perfect target, outlined as he was by the billowing flames behind him. He lunged sideways, gritting his teeth against the searing pain in his arm. Simultaneously, his right hand jerked downward, then up. Two thin red needles of flame lanced from the gun he was holding. Fowler staggered, coughed, then with a scream of horror, toppled forward.

"You better gimme them papers, Doc," Paige said quietly. "Ronson will be wantin' to see 'em when I let him free."

August grinned as he handed them over. "They're just a couple o' unpaid bills. I didn't have time to get the real ones after the fire busted out."

Paige shook his head in astonishment. "You sure beat all, Doc," he said. "An' I reckon the community owes you a vote o' thanks for puttin' Fowler outta business. An' Ute Jones' widow an' kids—"

"I got some powerful important business of my own to attend to." August interrupted, then he strode up the street.

It was later that night, over steaming platters of Martha Long's savory cooking that Luke managed to speak the words that had been trembling on his tongue for hours. He looked up from his plate, and there was misery stamped on his face.

"I wanta apologize, Doc," he muttered. "I've been dead wrong about you, and if there's any way I can make it up—"

"Forget it!" August said gruffly, helping himself to the fried chicken with his unbandaged hand. "A man sure can't hold a grudge against his own brother-in-law!"

Martha's eyes were starry and her smile tremulous as she looked from one to the other.

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Hope stared at the town where Hoss was in trouble. . . .

HOPE ETERNAL'S HOME-MADE JAIL-BREAK

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

Old Hope Eternal, the grizzled desert-rat who knew that tomorrow—sure!—he'd strike that fabulous lost lode, managed at last to find something more precious than all the hidden yellow wealth of the desert — the simple, human satisfaction of facing death, so that a friend might live in freedom!

HOPE ETERNAL and Sputter were prospector partners of two years' standing. Sputter — so nicknamed because of his talkativeness— was a ragamuffin boy of fourteen, a freckled waif of the wastelands. Hope Eternal couldn't remember having been anything but the weazened and scraggly-bearded little old desert rat he was now; couldn't remember, in fact, when he had

not been looking for the fabulously rich Miraflores lode, known by most people as a will-o'-the-wisp. The oldster, too, had come fairly by his nickname.

The man they called Hoss was something of an absurdity. Tall and broad, with blue eyes and short-curled yellowish hair and dark skin, he could outlaugh, out-cuss, out-ride and out-shoot anybody else the two partners had ever seen. In the month he had spent at their desert shack he'd done more than his part on the prospecting trips, had furnished more than his share of supplies. Not much wonder that the partners idolized him. His having mentioned neither his name nor his past didn't matter.

Then another stranger showed up.

He came late one brightly moonlit night. It was Hoss who first heard his cry of distress off in the desert. Hoss went out and found the man and carried him in.

"Water!" the man kept gasping. He was under middle age, lean, and had on clothing that until recently had been very good.

Hoss dropped the fellow on a bunk and put a canteen to his lips. "Open a tin of Georgia Belles, Sputter. He's bound to be starved. Not too much water, friend, to begin with. If you hanker to tell us who you are, why just cut loose."

The man raised his head weakly. "Frisco," he said. "In Denver they called me Frisco."

He was given only four of the peach halves as a starter. Hope Eternal had kindled a fire in the wired-up old cast-iron stove, and was making coffee. Nothing, said Hope, would pick a man up as fast as coffee, black as the bottom kettle of Tophet and as strong as roofing paint. Then he ventured: "Let yore hoss git away, huh? Whatche doing here in this desert, Frisco, anyhow?"

"Miraflores lode," answered the stranger. "Got to find it—"

Sputter had lost faith, had grown weary of the name. He blurted: "It's all stuff. There ain't and never was any sech thing as that gold lode, by thunder!"

"You talk powerful big for a button," said Hoss, laughing.

Hope Eternal looked hurt. Hoss went on: "Don't mind the kid, Hope. He's a infidel. Don't believe in anything he cain't see. You just keep right on hunting the Miraflores, and you'll find it, I bet."

"I expect I will, some day," drawled Hope, brightening. "Anyways, I aim to go on hunting it, picking up enough yaller to live on as I go. Thutty year back I had a map, and lost it to the packrats. You got a map, Frisco?"

"No," said Frisco. "No map."

Hoss got the boy's attention slyly, jerked his chin and ambled outside. The boy followed silently on bare feet.

This was an oasis, with its water-hole, its acre or so of grass, its pale verdes and a pair of gnarled old liveoaks. The two trees stood between the shack and a pole corral. Hoss drew up in the shadows and halted.

"Listen, kid," whispered the giant, soberly. "Maybe there ain't any Miraflores. But Hope believes there is, the same as a preacher believes—what all preachers believe. Don't you never, any more, even hint to old Hope that there ain't a Miraflores. You hear me, kid?"

"Yeah, by jingo," Sputter whispered back, "I hear you, Hoss, and I got sense enough to see that you're right. I'm sorry bustin' out the way I done."

HE FELT queer inside, somehow. He half turned and gazed absently at the stock in the corral—Hope's old raw-boned roan, Hoss's sun-bitten big sorrel, his own tough little buckskin pony. Then a hand the size of a small ham fell upon his shoulder.

"You're *mucho bueno,* son. Only, you ought to be at home with your pa and ma,

going to school, making something of yourself. Eh?"

Sputter stiffened. "I ain't got none, Hoss, and never did have none. Not that I can remember, anyhow. Say, look. That there Frisco rooster will bear some watchin'."

The blue eyes of Hoss became hard. After a moment, he muttered: "I'll watch Frisco, all right. Leave him to me."

"You seen him somewheres else, maybe?"

"Maybe," replied Hoss. "I'll tell you one thing, kid. He didn't come looking for any Miraflores lode. That just popped into his mind. Let's go back inside now."

Frisco had more water and more to eat. Then he went to sleep in the big man's bunk, and the big man piled down on the hard-packed earthen floor.

Hope Eternal had planned a trip to an all-rock section off toward the Border for the next day. He and Sputter set out at daybreak, leaving Hoss with Frisco at the shack. The boy wasn't quite easy about this. The Frisco rooster was smart, and looked it.

The partners had no luck at all that day. Weary and begrimed, with old Hope complaining uncommonly of rheumatism, they rode back at sundown. They were watering the roan and little buckskin when Sputter aimed a forefinger at the pole corral and cried out: "Looky! Hoss's sorrel ain't there, by grannies!"

The old man and the youngster got out of their saddles and flung down the reins, then hurried to the corral and began to hunt for sign. It had more than once been said that Hope Eternal could find sign where a Maricopa Indian couldn't. He found plenty now, and read it fast.

"See these tracks, button? Hoss's. See them right there? Frisco's. Close together, walking slow. Ain't been gone so long, fer no sand has fell into the tracks from the edges. They end here at the sorrel's tracks, meaning both men rode off on the sorrel. Heading east, and east means Hartston and the railroad!"

"YEAH," snapped Sputter, "and they's a jail there, too. Frisco's got the drop on Hoss somehow, and with Hoss's own gun, for Frisco didn't have no gun, far as I could see. By goshens, Hope, it was a lowdown trick, after what Hoss done for that rooster. You reckon Frisco was a lawman?"

"I've never yit seen a lawman that lowdown," said Hope. "Mebbe they was a big reward out for Hoss, and Frisco aimed to collect it. I've seen a heap o' men and life, kid. Hoss was wild, mebbe, but he wasn't no criminal. Mebbe somehow he got ketched in the catclaw of sarcumstance, but he ain't guilty. Anyway, Hoss is our friend. I aimed to cut him in equal on the Miraflores. Ortn't we do something fer him now, button?"

"Sure," Sputter answered quickly—"go get him and fetch him back, that's what!"

"Correct!" said Hope, pleased mightily. "If Frisco was a sheriff—but he ain't. C'm'on, son. Mebbe we can head 'em off afore they gits to the town. Moonlight tonight, so's we can see good."

In a saddle scabbard Hope Eternal always carried a big cap-and-ball Navy revolver that looked as old as he was, carried it for wolves and snakes. As a rule he wouldn't permit the boy to handle firearms, though Sputter knew how, well enough. The *viejo* now dug into the bottom of an ancient locker, and brought out another old Navy and another saddle scabbard, and gave them to the youngster.

"Been loaded so long," observed Sputter, "I bet she won't shoot, by George."

Just the same, he rode with confidence when he turned his buckskin eastward with the heavy old weapon banging against his knee. They left without supper, but they took along a grub sack half full, and two canteens. Hope Eternal soon was opening a tin of beef for them.

Night came down. After awhile the moon rose. Their mounts were jaded to begin with, and they hadn't the heart to push them. It became a tedious, lonesome ride. The old man grumbled about rheumatism. Sputter knew how to get his mind off that.

"It was a Spanish, you said, found the lode first?"

"Name o' Juan Miraflores, yeah." Old Hope perked up instantly. "Was s'posed to be not fur from a water-hole, but them holes comes and goes with the years; being filled with sand during storms. A occasional cloudbust changes things too, and mebbe earthquakes."

Sputter forced a chuckle. "Wouldn't it be funny if the lode turned out to be there close to the hole we live on, even right under the shanty, say, which you built long time before I was hatched?"

"Awful funny!" Hope Eternal chuckled too, but it wasn't forced. He caressed his scraggly-bearded chin. "Miraflores told that they was slabs and slabs of it, nearly solid, millions and millions o' dollars' wuth. She ain't no willer-the-wisp, sonny, like some folks seem to think she is."

"'Course not," said the lad, remembering the talk he'd had with Hoss. "But looky, Hope. What're you goin' to do with all o' them millions and millions when y' get 'em?"

They rode for a good quarter of an hour before the old man's voice creaked out again. He'd never spoken so solemnly as now. "Y'know, Sputter. I've never wearied none over that. All I've thought about was jest to find the lode."

The boy wondered about that for a long while . . . .

ALTHOUGH the big sorrel could hardly have kept up a brisk walk under its double burden, the partners had not overtaken Hoss and Frisco when they dismounted beside a cottonwood-lined creek within two miles of town. The sun now was an hour high. Hope Eternal was exhausted to the point of collapse. Sputter saw that the oldster was completely played out. "Let's rest some," he said. "Then we'll be able to help Hoss better."

Hope Eternal looked at the boy, then stared at the town, where Hoss was in trouble. Finally he nodded, "Guess you're right," he said.

They staked the buckskin and roan to grass near by, ate a cold breakfast, then stretched out wearily. It was dusk when they awoke.

"I don't think we ort to quit now," Hope said, going to his feet with the aid of a sapling. "I think we ort to sneak into town and see ef we cain't do something fer Hoss. Right, kid?"

"Right, by Joe," quickly said Sputter, also on his feet. "I'll bring the nags."

With the moon not yet up, it was quite dark when they rode into Hartston. A short freight train held them up for a few minutes, and Sputter, big-eyed, watched silently as the four-driver locomotive pulled three empty box-cars, and three flats loaded with hoisting engines and other mining machinery into a siding.

"I know a sawbones here," muttered Hope after the caboose had cleared the rocky street. "We'll see him about my rheumatiz and find out about Hoss from him too, sly like. Right, kid?"

"Right, by Joe."

Old Doc Enderby, little and slim and quick, had his office in a sun-warped false-front building at the edge of the business section. He rose with a snap when the two men eased through the door, turned up the wick of the oil lamp on his desk for better light.

"Hope, you wrinkley old coot!" he shouted, holding out his hand. "I reckon you've come to tell me you've found the Miraflores!"

"Not yit, Doc, not yit," said Hope.

"But I expect I will, some day. The button here, he says as we rides along, he says wouldn't it be funny if the lode turned out to be right under the shack we been livin' in! Sorta stuck in my mind. Makes me think—Sputter, ef ever anything happens to me, I got forty dollars buried in a glass jar in the nawthwest corner o' the shack floor, and you can dig her up."

Enderby shook hands with the boy too, and the boy felt proud. Then Hope Eternal began to describe his miseries. The doctor's smile vanished. He went to work with the stethoscope and tiny mallet.

"Set down," he said, pointing to a rocker. The patient sat down. Enderby picked up his feet in their rusty old boots, and had the lad put a straightback chair under them. "And stay set," Enderby went on, soberly. "Lean back. Don't even lift a hand. Got any pain now?"

"Leetle speck betwixt my shoulders. Why?"

"Sorry to break the news, Hope," Enderby looked grim, and Sputter held his breath waiting for more. "It's not rheumatism, Hope. It's angina. The wonder is that you ever lived to get here. But no more physical exertion, and you'll likely live years yet, old as you are. That's your bright spot."

The desert man got it slowly. His smile was tiny and white. "Just set, huh? Jest set and do nothing. Shucks, Doc, I cain't!"

Sputter got it also. To him Hope Eternal was more than a partner. To him Hope was father and mother, sister and brother and god. He swallowed something. Wanted to beller, but derned if he would, and to make sure he didn't he clamped his teeth together so hard that his jaw muscles ridged his cheeks.

"DOC," cautiously began the weazened patient, "I am afeared they got a good friend o' mine in jail here, since mebbe around daylight this morning. Know anything about it?"

"Big as a hoss," breathed Sputter, "with a dark hide, and blue eyes like mine, and curly yellerish hair."

Enderby now was scowling. He seemed unaware of the boy's existence. He fussed with the lamp on his desk, fussed with his watch-chain, then began talking almost explosively:

"Friend of yours, Hope, you say? You've been badly fooled. That man is wanted for murder. Real name is Detheridge, I understand. Some kind of special officer brought him in at sunup this morning, and the sheriff locked him up. Sure to hang, they say. Yes, Hope, you were taken in!"

"Hang?" gasped the *viejo* in the rocker. "Doc, that's all wrong! Why, Hoss ain't no criminal! It's a mistake!"

"Don't work yourself up," warned Enderby. "You just forget all about that fellow. I've got a back room here with a bed in it, and you—"

"Don't work myself up, huh? Jest set here and knit, or tat, mebbe, whilst a friend o' mine is crossing old dark river wearing the wrong kind o' necktie! For something he never done!" Hope Eternal went to his feet. His lined face wore a queer grin. "C'm'on, button, le's go!" he ordered.

The little old doctor did all he knew, said all he could, and it availed nothing.

As Enderby had indicated, the town was quiet. There wasn't any roystering in the saloons, few were on the semi-dark main street. Although Sputter had been in Hartston before, he didn't remember the location of the jail. He asked Hope about it.

"Up at the other end o' the business section," was the low-toned response. "Behind the co'tehouse, and close to a church. Say, makes me think. The wimmenfolks o' this town gits up a petition nearly every year trying to have the

jail moved on account it's so close to that church. Well—I think we'll jest move it fer them wimmenfolks!"

"And set Hoss free at the same time?" Sputter's voice was hushed but vibrant. "How'll we do it, Hope?"

"The idee," come in a whisper, "jest hit me like a mule's kick. This way, young'un. We got to hurry!"

"But the doc, by crikey, he said—"

"I told you we got to hurry," cut in Hope Eternal. He gripped the lad's arm and led him in between two dark buildings.

They moved up the dim alleyway the length of two blocks. Ahead of them stood a squat, old brick building with small windows. These windows were barred. Only the one closest to the rear was lighted. Hope pointed to an open, lighted doorway in the back of the nearby courthouse.

"That'd be where the jailer stays," he whispered. "Undoubtedly he makes rounds o' the jail frequent, so we'll hafta be quick. Look over yonder, kid, and tell me what you see."

Sputter looked toward the left and saw the spire of a wooden church. He cut his eyes to the right. Between him and the western sky loomed a pair of hoisting engines on a flat car. He caught the idea then, and breathed: "Say, Hope, by thunder and lightnin', you ain't—"

"I SURE am. I mean, we are. You being jest a young'un, what blame they is will fall on me. But do I keer? Not when I got a friend to be hung fer something he didn't do! Think I hear the passenger's whistle, so we got to move fast. C'm'on!"

"But the doc said—"

"He don't know everything." Hope Eternal was pushing the boy toward the flat. "Anyhow, what if he did?"

There was no bucking him. Sputter wheeled and ran on, beat him to the car, clambered up a stirrup step. In almost no time at all was peering closely at a hoisting-engine drum filled with wire cable. He found the end of the cable, and there was a heavy iron hook on it. He picked up the hook and pulled. The drum turned easily, since the clutch was not in. He sprung off the flat car with the cable end in his hands, and labored toward the jail building.

It became heavier. Against Sputter's protests, his partner helped drag it around the building in the darkness. They could hear the oncoming train plainly now. Nobody flagged the passenger, and it didn't stop. Hope and the boy hooked the cable to itself with the jail inside the big loop.

After a long minute the freight locomotive blew and began to cough. The old man and youngster retired to deeper shadows, with the *viejo* mumbling: "If only the other end o' the cable is fastened tight on the spool! Likely it is, though. Reckon, the whole h'istin' apparatus is bolted down. Ef it ain't, it'll only pull off the flat, and nothin' else!"

Sputter pointed to the one lighted cell window. "Hadn't I better sneak word to Hoss to be ready when the jail busts up!"

"Believe I would. Hustle, button."

The lad flitted to the window. It was so high that he couldn't see inside. "Hoss!" he said in guarded low tones. "Hoss! Watch out now—git ready to dodge a wire cable cuttin' through the jail—it's hitched to that freight train!"

"Right!" came back to him. He barely heard it above the growing rumble of the freight.

Sputter ran back to Hope Eternal. The old man was very white now. He said something that the boy did not catch because of the noise. Sputter decided that it must be the angina thing again, and was afraid. He led Hope slowly down the dim alleyway, then out to the main street in front of the one hotel. The rumble of

the puffing train had just begun to fade.

"How long—" muttered Hope—"how long is that there cable, anyhow? Son, you reckon it—"

Then there was a tremendous crashing, grinding sound. Boards and timbers were splintering and snapping. Brick and stone rattled and thumped. Suddenly there was a noise like a gun going off. The cable, after having completely wrecked the old jail, had broken!

HOSS

The half-dark street was now alive with people who ran this way and that way, like ground birds under the shadow of a cruising hawk. Everybody was asking questions, nobody answering. One man shouted that it was an earthquake. Hope Eternal and Sputter were crowded off the warped-board sidewalk. Hope kept his feet by clinging to the horse-teeth-scarred hitch rail.

"You reckon," fearsomely asked the boy, "Hoss coulda been hurt in that there smashup?"

"I'd thought he'd be active enough to dodge things," the oldster said weakly. "I'd thought—look, kid. Look!"

IT WAS big Hoss. He had spied them. Hope Eternal lost his hold on the rail and slumped to the ground, death white. Immediately Hoss was there gathering the weazened little figure into his giant arms. Sputter cried: "The doc, take him to the doc—I'll show you the way!"

"They'll ketch you, *amigo,*" Hope muttered. "Better drop me and start to high-tail."

Hoss grinned down into the thin old face. Hoss did not drop him and high-tail. Carrying his burden as lightly as though it were a stick, he went running down the street after the running boy. Doc Enderby stood in his lighted office doorway. He saw the trio coming and turned to take up the lamp, and lead the way into his small back room.

"Put him down there," Enderby ordered, nodding at a bed.

The big man obeyed. He backed off and stood watching with Sputter. The doctor gave his patient some medicine and told him to relax and lie still.

Sputter said: "By cripes, Hoss, y'better be runnin' before they catch up with yuh! Why don't you high-tail?"

The doctor frowned. "I'll have to ask you two to get out, and don't come back until tomorrow."

Hoss stood there uncertain for a moment, then with a last look at Hope, turned and left. Enderby took away Sputter's old Navy six-shooter, gave him a dollar, and suggested that he go to the hotel and get a room. Thinking to save the dollar, the boy went instead to the livery stable. Nobody was there. He climbed into a haymow. That night seemed to have no end. . . .

It was the name, Miraflores, that brought him out of troubled sleep a little after sunrise. He crawled silently to the edge of the hay and peered downward. Almost directly under him stood Hoss! With him was the liveryman. The big man went on talking: "The judge's wife wants the kid, and the doctor's and the sheriff's wives want him too. He sure made a hit with the wimmenfolks, wrecking that old jail—so he'll have a good home, no matter what."

"Too bad about poor old Hope Eternal," the liveryman mumbled.

"Or is it?" said Hoss. "Old, worn out, to die saving a friend was a God's way to go. The preacher said Hope had found his lost lode, and maybe he was right. I'm glad he didn't find out that Frisco, and not me, was the killer Detheridge; and that I was the special officer. This way Hope went out thinking he died saving a friend. That was enough for old Hope. Detheridge busted a leg in the jail smash, and didn't get away. Fate was there! Well—wonder where the kid went? I'm through with the law job, and own a little saw outfit, and I wouldn't mind having Sputter—"

"Hoss!" cried the barefoot ragamuffin, and he leaned too far over, and fell. Hoss caught him, and held him, and the blue eyes in his strong dark face suddenly misted.

The boy kept swallowing. Hard as hell to keep from bellering now, but be derned if he'd do it!

"You sure are one game little pardner," the big man said then, "and I'm awful glad I found you."

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LOGS AND BLOOD

A Smashing Novelette of a Fighting

"To the lake!" he shouted. "It's our only chance."

FOR PITT RIVER

Lumberman

By ROLLAND LYNCH

They were slowly starving, those lumbermen of Timberlock Valley, for the Big Three had devastated their land with hell fire. But worse than their hunger was their fear, and Jim Ridell knew that those beaten men would never fight again—unless he gave his life to teach them how!

CHAPTER ONE

Trouble on the River

THE Cascade Mountains had begun pulling the night's purple cloak over their lower slopes. Timberlock Valley lay somnolent, its stately stand of trees an evergreen army waiting in the

darkness. The waning Oregon sun touched the high, snow-covered peaks with its last rays and set them afire. Then like candles caught suddenly in a windy gust, the flames were gone and the sky darkened and stars began to tumble out around the clouds. Jim Ridell's freight wagon rolled through the dusk, grating and creaking as an iron-rimmed wheel scraped a rock or sunk into a rut.

Jim's broad body swayed easily with the uneven roll. He sat hunched in the wagonette, elbows on his knees, the reins loose in his brown hands. His handsome face was young, yet seamed with the rigor of sun and wisdom of this country. His faded wool shirt was open at the throat, baring a smooth and deep chest. The thighs of his stag-trousers were shiny from rubbing his weight against a peavey handle. His calk-boots were scarred, but the steel points protruding from the soles were shiny and needle sharp. Jim made this run down the tote road once a week, delivering supplies to the lumber camps in the upper reaches of Timberlock. The run was his salvation and helped him pay taxes on the stand of lumber he owned and once had operated. It had been a struggling existence at best—even before the Big Three, Bastrop, Shadrow and Gardner, had frozen the small lumbermen out. Now Jim spoke to the man riding beside him.

"I'm done freighting, Gloomy, and going back into the lumber business. The Badnoch Milling Company begins construction on the lower dams in a few days and I'll be able to float my logs to market. I won't have to take what the Big Three offer any more. Their grip on this valley is done."

Slumped lazily on the seat, Jim's swamper, Gloomy Carse, chawed abstractly on a wad of Brown's Mule. He was stirred a little by the vehemence in Jim's voice. Raising his bearded face, he squirted a thin stream of juice past the whip stock and shook his head sadly. "Don't count your logs before they're in the mill. If the dams get built your stand will amount to something. If they don't, it'll just keep on being so much shade. Bastrop and the others aren't going to lay back and let you take their bulge away easy like."

"If they want fight, they'll get it," said Jim stoutly. "That bunch has under-bid me, dammed the water so I can't drive, and offered to lease my timber at a price that's ridiculous. It's my turn now."

Gloomy shot out another stream of juice. "You'll probably fight alone," he said. "Bastrop, Shadrow and Gardner have controlled Timberlock for so long the people don't know anything else."

"Then I go it alone."

Gloomy chuckled. "Could it be a pretty face like Jerry Gardner's drivin' you to this, son? Maybe so. Hell! I've seen men change the course of bigger rivers than the Pitt for less."

The wagon rounded a turn and revealed the lights of Elkhorn. A locomotive was working in the yards, its headlight a silvery pencil stabbing at the dark. Without warning, Jim clucked to the horses and they bellied to the traces. The sudden start jarred Gloomy off balance and he went backward into the wagon bed. His language was hot enough to start a forest fire as Jim pulled up before the town corral.

As Gloomy climbed creakily out of the wagon rubbing an elbow, he swore, "Touchy, ain't yuh? There ain't a place on my body that don't feel like it's been jabbed with a pike pole."

"Come on," Jim shoved him good-naturedly. "I'll set up a drink that'll ease you again."

Jim turned his team over to the hostler, motioned Gloomy to follow, and led the way down the boardwalk toward Bill Sikes' Bull Pine Bar. It was the biggest place in Elkhorn. There you could hear

of the latest gold strike, about the price of beaver plew, lumber talk, and gossip about the dams. Jim was interested in the last. He and Gloomy pushed through the swinging doors, then were stopped in their tracks by the grim silence that held the room. They stood unnoticed amid the tension.

A SHORT, slender man in khaki, field boots and stiff-brimmed Stetson stood with his back to the bar. A solid bank of lumberjacks were fanned out about him, their corded muscles bulging their plaid shirts. Facing the small man was Link Bastrop, son of Keo, the head of the Big Three. Link was a giant in calked boots.

He was saying, "You'll never stop a drop of water in the Pitt or get a shovel full of dirt into a dam."

"I'm here on orders, mister," said the short man tersely. "I'll carry them out. My company wants the timber in the lower valley and are financing the dams to get it. Your combine has held us up long enough. Your bullying and threatening won't get you anywhere with me."

Link swelled until he threatened to burst out of his clothes. It had been many a day since anyone had challenged his authority. He was considered the best rough and tumble man in the upper reaches of the valley and men spoke softly to him.

Link's hand shot out and gripped the small man by the throat. "So you don't hear well—?" he swore and began shaking the khaki-clad figure as a giant wind shakes a sapling tree. The clustered loggers bellowed their mirth. The little man's face turned red and his eyes bulged in their sockets.

Unmindful that Gloomy had put out a hand to stay him, Jim stepped forward. Link represented all the arrogance and cruelty of the Big Three who used just such tactics as this to gain their ends in the valley. Jim's shoulders worked and tipped men out of the way. The laughter was dying out as he made Link's side and reached out. He spun Link, striking his grip from the man's throat with his free hand. The khaki-clad figure reeled back against the bar, his hand clawing at his neck as he sucked in huge drafts of air.

There was the sound of a bottle shattering as Gloomy broke a quart of whiskey against the bar and stuck out the jagged neck: "We'll let these two argue in peace," he said, and the angry surge of the lumberjacks stopped.

Jim's voice was barely controlled as he said to Link, "Do you always pick on the smallest tree when there's wood to cut?"

Color surged to the roots of Link's dark hair. With a livid curse, his fist shot out and landed on Jim's chest. The young freighter reeled from the impact. Willing hands reached out and stopped him and shoved him back toward Link. There were joyful yips as the Bastrop men called out to Link.

"Axe him off at the belt!" "Peel all the bark off him!"

Jim drew his head down and rushed forward. He realized now that he had been looking forward to something like this for a long time. He grinned faintly. Link circled, watching him warily. Then with another curse, he struck. Jim kept his chin tucked against his shoulder as he swung his fists, landing them against Link's ribs. It was like trying to make pulp out of oak with knuckles.

Blows rained about Jim's shoulders and head. One knocked the lights out for a moment, but he never lost his balance nor his forward surge. He shook his head and kept boring in, shifting his attack now to Link's flat features.

The men howled with excitement. The little man in khaki forgot the hurt of his throat as he watched the titanic struggle. Gloomy Carse's be-whiskered jaws forgot the chaw.

The two men in the center of the human arena ebbed and surged in the clear-

ing, slugging, pushing, wrestling, always to part for a moment and circle warily while they sucked in huge breaths. Then like clawing grizzlies they would lock again, hammering furiously at each other's bodies and heads.

Blood flowed freely from a cut over Link's eye. The young freighter's chin had been cut and the trickle had dyed Link's shoulder crimson, so close did he stand to his opponent. Their eyes were puffed and their hair lay matted to the perspiration on their foreheads.

Now Link began to show his weariness by trying to wrestle Jim to the floor where he could bring his terrific weight advantage into effect. But the supple youngster twisted out of those arms as an eel slides through wet hands. He disdained drawing back for a breathing spell and pressed on relentlessly, venting his hatred of the domineering Big Three upon the man before him. He wanted to send Link Bastrop back to them in a way to leave no doubt in their minds that the small lumbermen could beat them when they put their hearts to it.

Link was a swaying, beaten hulk before him when Jim surged in to end the battle. But before he got to his man, he felt a numbing shock on his right shoulder and his arm dropped uselessly to his side. Sick and weak from the pain of the blow, he reeled against the bar, catching it with his left hand and holding himself up. Over the panting of his breath, he heard Marshal Brady's bellow:

"EVERY damn one of you stand still. You've got to keep your fighting up in the hills. I won't have it here in Elkhorn."

The rifle barrel with which he had struck Jim was leveled at his hip. His seamed and leathery face was set like granite.

Link Bastrop wiped his battered face with the torn sleeve of his shirt. With his last ounce of arrogance, he managed to grin at Jim and say, "You're lucky. Another minute and I'd have had your face under my calks. Some other time. C'mon, boys." Reeling a little from fatigue, he led the way from the saloon.

Marshal Brady turned and followed them out.

Gloomy moved to Jim's side, shaking his head. "The drive's started," he muttered dolefully, "and I don't see nothin' but jams ahead. Here," he poured out a glass of whiskey and forced Jim to drink it.

With the fire of the liquor eating into his veins, Jim felt his weariness ease a little. He looked into the bar mirror. Link had done a pretty good job. There was a blue streak beneath one eye and a skinned patch on his cheek. The cut on his chin had ceased bleeding. Jim turned at the tug on his tattered shirt sleeve.

The little khaki clad man introduced himself. "I'm Bob Borden," he said. "In your debt. He would have broken me in two. You were about to do that to him."

Jim flushed modestly. "Forget it," he said. "I was looking for it, I guess. Have been for about three years. This was as good an opportunity as any."

"I'm the field surveyor and construction superintendent assigned to stake out and build the new dams along the Pitt," said Borden. "If the others of this community are willing to fight like you did, I don't anticipate much trouble getting the work done."

"Then you don't know Bastrop, Shadrow, Gardner or the Valley," said Gloomy dourly. "Jim didn't do the cause any good tonight, mister. Lightning only has to strike once around here to get a fire going you can't control."

The surveyor shook his head. "If they make trouble, they'll be going strictly against the law. They've dammed the river above you. You have rights, you know."

"The Big Three ain't never heard the word," muttered Gloomy. "The only law around here is the marshal and he's smart enough to stay inside the city limits. As for rights—there just ain't any."

Bob Borden turned to Jim. "The Badnoch Milling Company can use a man like you," he said.

"Doing what?" asked Jim.

"Freighting—strong arm, and perhaps more trouble with the Big Three for two hundred dollars a month."

Jim pondered for a moment. Working on construction would tide him over until the dams were in and he could begin cutting timber. "I'll take the job," he said, "providing one thing—"

"Your partner?" Borden interrupted. "The same pay."

Jim nodded and the surveyor went on. "Our first work will be at Eagle Point. That's government freeway. Any trouble the Big Three make will be a federal offense. We won't have any trouble there."

"Maybe not there," said Gloomy, "but they'll find some way."

"We'll know how they stand tomorrow," said the engineer. "There's a meeting of the valley folks in the town hall. I want both of you with me. I'll meet you at the Oregon House in the morning. We'll go together."

Jim nodded and shook hands with the little man. Then, with Gloomy beside him, he left the barroom.

Outside, Carse cackled, "I'm sharpening my calks. Looks like this country is going to come back fast. I mind the time when you could burl a man like you would a log every morning before breakfast."

Jim was silent as he led the way to their beds in the hotel. If the lower valley was ever to cut a stick of timber it would be only after a hard fight. Link Bastrop wouldn't be an easy opponent.

In bed, with Gloomy snoring loudly, Jim continued staring up at the dark ceiling, listening to the pant of the switch engine. Down in the yards there were flat cars waiting to carry his lumber to coastal ports for distribution throughout the world. His stand would bring him enough revenue to . . . Jerry Gardner . . . Maybe . . . He dropped into a troubled sleep. The bell of the switch engine kept up its constant clanging.

CHAPTER TWO

War Declared

JIM RIDELL and Gloomy Carse hit the main street of Elkhorn just as the sun became sapling high. The crisp tang from the upper reaches of the Cascades was still in the air. Over by Owl Creek a gray pennant of fog stretched along the water's course. The smell of pine was pungent on the breeze.

Jim stretched lithe muscles and looked toward the silent mills. "Some of our timber will be going through there after the first autumn rains," he said proudly.

"There'll be blood on those logs," muttered Gloomy. "Mark my word—there'll be blood on 'em."

He turned as Bob Borden strode up. The three men exchanged greetings and Borden invited them to breakfast. They ate heartily, looking out of the window of the Chink restaurant and watching the wagons and horses bringing the Timberlock people in to the meeting. A group of lumberjacks surged by, Keo Bastrop and Chet Shadrow at their head. Later, John Gardner rode past in his rig, Jerry sitting pertly beside him, a parasol shading her corn-colored hair.

When the meal was finished, the three started up street. At the corral, Gloomy angled away, but caught them again before they arrived at the hall. He handed Jim the gun he had dug out of the box in the wagonette of the freight wagon. The butt of another stuck up out of the waist band of his trousers. Jim frowned, but

yet he jammed the weapon into his belt.

As they neared the door of the hall, Jim slowed his stride. Jerry Gardner had come from the interior and was advancing to meet him. In her freshly laundered gingham with its tight bodice, she seemed to flow along the walk. Her eyes lighted as she saw him and her pace quickened. She frowned at the marks on his face, but smiled and extended her hand.

"Going to the meeting?"

"Yes," Jim answered and introduced her to Bob Borden.

Jerry's lids lowered as Bob bowed respectfully and said to Gloomy, "We'll go along. Don't be too long, Jim." He and Carse went into the hall.

Jerry's hand came out to touch Jim's arm. "That man, Borden—" she faltered. "The Badnoch Milling Company." Her forehead puckered with concern. "Dad was pretty stiff and silent this morning. You know what that means. He's been talking war with Bastrop and Shadrow. Jim, you'll listen to what they say won't you?"

"I'll have to," he said drily.

"I know how you feel, but you'll be reasonable, please? You'll see it Dad's way for now?"

Jim's lips tightened. "I don't know," he said. "Depends on how he sees it. Jerry, I've only made a bare living with my freight run. I've a structural stand that's as good as any in the state. Construction starts soon on the dams and I'll be working for the Badnoch Company."

"No!" she gasped, her hands flying to her throat. "Oh, Jim! You can't—You can't tell what dad and the others will decide to do. Things have been all right—"

Jim shrugged his shoulders with annoyance. "All right?" he echoed. "Just all right. Your father and the others have seen to that. I might go on here, just struggling along until something happens and I couldn't pay my taxes. Then three men, drunk with their power, would offer me a ridiculous price for my stand. No! Here's the chance to do something for myself, and I'll fight to get it done."

"When you speak of three men drunk with power you include my father," said Jerry indignantly.

"He's one of them," countered Jim hotly. "I asked him for your hand. He told me to become a lumberman worthy of you. Then he did everything he could to keep me down. But it's not a question of you and me anymore. It's what will happen to the whole of Timberlock. Your father and the others pay lower wages every year. We can barely survive now let alone pay taxes. All that has to be changed."

Jerry's face drained of all color and the pulse hammered in her throat. "It will be as soon as times get better—"

"Times are all right," interrupted Jim. "It's just the Big Three holding up the prices and freezing us out bit by bit. When we're gone they can do anything they like. I for one am not going to quit!"

"You're accusing my father of tactics like that? Well, it's not true. He wouldn't hurt anyone or keep them down. You've filled your heart with hatred, Jim. And you're ready to take it out in fighting instead of the hard work that would have built a home for you and me—"

"Would have?"

"Yes," she flung at him, her eyes starry with unshed tears. "As long as you think of father as you do, I don't care to see you." She stepped past him and continued on up street.

JIM watched her go, a lump forming in his throat. He couldn't blame her for the stand she took. It was her father. But John Gardner was as bad as the others. Pompous with power. Perhaps less domineering with the little man, but firm and resolute in maintaining his own sway over Timberlock Valley. Jim shrugged and turned into the hall.

Inside, the room was jammed to the bursting point with men and women. Huge clouds of tobacco smoke rose ceilingward, and the buzz of conversation was like the droning of an angry swarm of bees. Somewhere a child cried and its mother's voice rose in a soothing chant. The women lined the walls of the hall, huddled there, caring for their infants. Jim scanned those passive faces as he strode into the room. He smiled and nodded to those he knew.

Gloomy Carse had stayed close to the front door, a vantage point where he could command all of the room with his eyes—and gun. Borden was on the raised platform and Jim joined him. He looked for Link Bastrop in the gathering, but he was not there.

On the stage, Keo Bastrop's heavy body filled a chair completely. His rotund features were set as if his face were carved from alabaster. His short, thick arms rested on his ample thighs. His black broadcloth coat lent him the aspect of a gambler.

Chet Shadrow, on Bastrop's right, was alarmingly thin. His shoulders didn't seem any wider apart than his eyes. His nose was a knife blade; and his tongue was as sharp.

John Gardner lazed back in his chair, muscled arms folded across his chest. There was a Sphinx-like aura about Gardner, for his leathery face, cured by countless winds and suns, spoke none of his inner thoughts. He was the enigma of Timberlock Valley. In his gruff way, he had been known to give a man his last dollar. Yet he ruled what was his with a firm hand. Of the three, he had made his the hard way, beginning on the busy end of a pike pole and peavey.

Jim took the chair next to Borden. Keo Bastrop rose ponderously and the small talk stilled.

"Everybody that represents Timberlock," he said. "Is here to talk about the new dams. There isn't any reason to beat around the bush. We'll hear arguments for and against. Mister Borden—" he turned mockingly, "—of the milling company should be the first to speak for himself."

Bastrop resumed his seat as Borden rose. Jim took the pulse of the audience and what he found shocked him. Those men out there weren't receiving Borden in a friendly way. Their eyes were shifting to the Big Three as if they were afraid they might offend them by even listening. Bastrop, Shadrow and Gardner had completely dominated these people with their presence.

Borden began, "We've got the permits to build the dams at Eagle Point and Rocky Gorge. I promise that none of your present property will be touched or damaged. The works will be of earth which we intend to haul from burned sections. All of you will benefit by this work for it will enable you to—"

"Benefit? Benefit?" Chet Shadrow surged to his feet. "Benefit, hell. It'll cause jams and delays at flood times when we're ready to drive—"

"Shut up, Chet," John Gardner cut him off. "You'll have your say later."

The author of this story, Rolland Lynch, knows how to bring to life all the lusty color and man-drama of the frontier—whether cattle-range, boom-camp, or the big woods. Don't fail to read his thrilling, brief epic of the old Chisholm Trail, in March *Dime Western*—"The World's Leading Western Magazine." Ask your news-dealer to save your copy—on sale everywhere January 31st!

Grumbling, Chet sat down, his thin face angrily red.

Borden passed a nervous hand over his brow and looked pleadingly at Jim. Then he continued: "As I said before, the dams will harm none of you. The upper valley will be permitted to use them without cost. The people of the lower valley will profit—"

"By God, you're right!" a lean lumberjack leaped to his feet, his clenched fist raised. "They ain't going to scare me out. I've worked for small wages long enough. I'm for the dams a hundred percent. I—"

His voice broke off in a gasp as Cash Wonder, Shadrow's foreman, moved close and hit him. The lean man went down.

IN one swift motion, Jim Ridell leaped the stage and into the center of the Big Three men. He drew his gun. "Easy, boys," he cautioned. "I've got you from in front and my partner has you from behind. This meeting's for free speaking. Take back your seats or I'll stretch out a few—"

An uneasy murmur swept through the men, but they gave back as the groaning lumberman's wife and boy helped him to his feet. Between them they got him to the door and outside. The woman was crying; the boy whimpering childish protest and vengeance.

White hot anger swayed Jim. This brutality and suppression filled him with a mad desire to start shooting. Lips thin, he faced the stage.

"I'm having my say," he barked. "I've got as much at stake as anyone. Let me tell you this—I've had to fight like hell to keep my place. Had to do that because of those three men sitting up there who have cornered the water and fixed the prices. I'm continuing to fight, this time to become a lumberman; and I'll do it if I have to do it alone!"

The room was in utter silence when he had finished. There was admiration in the eyes of the smaller lumbermen, but the fear of the powerful men on the rostrum all but engulfed it. The eyes of Bastrop, Shadrow and Gardner were flooded with rage. The lumberjacks were sullen. Suddenly, the room burst into talk, then Chet Shadrow was on his feet again shouting for the floor.

"Don't let his brags sway you," he said harshly. "Things aren't so bad. You're all living well. You've got food, a school and clothes to wear. I and Keo and John will see that you'll always be taken care of. We pay wages and lease some of your growth. When times get better wages will go up—"

"Hold on a minute," John Gardner rose to his feet. "The millers will want to log every other section of land of all stands over eight inches to pay for the building of these dams. They'll connive you out of more—"

"That's a lie!" Borden shouted.

Bastrop joined the standing duo and pounded his huge fist on the table. "Once the Badnoch Company gets their hooks into your timber there won't be enough left for toothpicks. The dams aren't going through!"

Electric silence greeted this ultimatum. The babbling confusion had stopped and all eyes focused on Jim Ridell. The stalwart youngster's lips were compressed into thin lines as he looked at the surveyor. Borden held up his hand and said:

"Those are lies; all lies. Your land will stay as it is—in your possession. It's customary for the people to pledge support toward the construction. If you don't see fit to do it—you won't be needed. Jim Ridell is man timbre enough for me. Speaking for my company and myself, the dams will back up the water of the Pitt for the lower Timberlock people who want it; and the rest of you be damned. Good day, gentlemen." He moved off of the platform to Jim's side.

"Wait a minute," commanded John Gardner. "We'll fight every move you make to bottle up the river."

Borden turned toward him. "While you're making your plans," he said, "don't overlook Federal law."

Then he was tugging at Jim's sleeve and propelling him from the hall.

Jim felt the guarded admiration of the lower valley people and the hatred of the Big Three and their cohorts. He conquered a desire to turn upon them and hurl the challenge that would open construction with gunsmoke. Outside, Gloomy joined them, cackling: "Yes siree, looks like the country's coming back."

Jim nodded grim agreement. All hell would burst loose in Timberlock once construction was started.

In turning from the doorway, Jim almost bumped into Jerry. She had finished her shopping and was returning for her father. She stopped breathlessly before him. She saw his grimness and knew what had taken place. With a defiant toss of her head she swept past him into the hall.

Jim stood immobile for a moment, looking after her, then he was slowly moving up street after Borden and Gloomy. Why couldn't she see that this wasn't in his hands? That the Big Three had declared war, and to survive he must fight!

CHAPTER THREE

Hell Fire

THE second day, men of the Badnoch Milling Company began pouring in to begin construction of the dams. They were a different breed from the loggers. They were shovel and pick calloused men with neither the height nor breadth of the lumberjack. But they knew their business and under the organization of Bob Borden, the Eagle Point barrier was begun. As Bob expressed it, as soon as a showing was made, the lower valley people would be certain to rally behind him.

Jim Ridell was put in charge of supplying brush and dirt for the breastworks. Gloomy Carse drove the Ridell freight wagon, while others, with their teams, were imported. Working with tireless effort, Jim kept a steady flow of materials pouring to the men who were harnessing the Pitt. Pridefully, he watched the earthen mound grow.

The Big Three were strangely silent and the lower valley people mysteriously disinterested in the work. They remained so throughout the hot, dusty summer months. Bob Borden advanced the theory that Bastrop, Shadrow and Gardner knew they were beaten and were helpless to do anything about it; that the valley people were just taking their time in coming around. Jim knew that was not true and kept a sharp vigil.

When the Eagle Point was nearly done and work was begun on Rocky Gorge, John Borden returned from the mills with startling news.

"They gave me notice," he told Jim, "that if I don't get the people behind me I have to stop construction. But they gave me something to offer. The company will take a half a million feet of lumber from the lower Timberlock, thirty-percent of each man's cut to count as his share in this dam work. It's got to be good structural stuff, for Badnoch's contract calls for spars and timbers for ships. The only drawback is that it must be at the mill no later than November twentieth. Think you can swing the people and get it out?"

Jim nodded seriously. "I'll have to. We can't quit now. If we abandoned this work it would fall into the hands of the Big Three."

"That's right," muttered Borden. "You had better start now. I'll handle the rest of the work here and have the dam ready for the drive once it's ready."

Jim went to the corral and singled him-

self out a saddle horse. In the leather, he waved at Borden and Gloomy and went up the hill through the timber. The sun was an hour past its zenith, sending the tall trees' shadows toward the east when he crossed a lush meadow and rode up to Cliff Boyer's cabin. The lean lumberjack, who jumped up at the meeting and had been knocked unconscious for his enthusiasm, came out and sat down on the adzed log steps.

Jim lit down and squatted before him. "Want to join in on a contract to supply a half million feet to Badnoch? Thirty per cent of it will go toward paying for the dams they're putting in."

Quick interest fired the lean man's eyes, but died quickly. His hand crept up and pawed at his chin. "I don't dare," he said slowly. "Link Bastrop was by. I got a busted head once for just saying something. Link told me I'd get worse if I tied up with you or Badnoch."

Jim eyed the man scornfully. "That tells me a lot of things," he said. "They found out about the Badnoch contract before I did. I wondered why they've been playing such a quiet game. They've been around putting fear into you people. They know that if you don't line up Badnoch will abandon the dams and they'll be able to take over. They've figured it pretty sweet, but for one thing. I'll get this contract out myself!"

Cliff Boyer shook his head again. "You've been too busy with the dams to notice things, Jim," he said. "Bastrop, Shadrow and Gardner have hired every man in the country to work for them. Gave me a raise in pay. If you get out a half million feet of logs, you and Gloomy will have to do it alone."

Jim bit his lips, picked up a stick and began tracing aimless patterns in the dust. "So," he murmured. He looked past Cliff at the small cabin.

"I get a raise," said Boyer. "I'm sure of food and clothing and no trouble. If I joined in on that contract, they might do something else to me and I'll be out in the snow this winter with nothing warm. I can't take a chance, Jim. I got a wife and boy."

Jim stood up and waved his hand at the shacky cabin. "That's all you'll ever have, Cliff," he said. "Your backbone's rubber. You'll keep on licking the boots of the Big Three while your wife and boy wait out their lives for you to do something beside just earn 'em food and clothing. All right—" He turned toward his horse. Half way to it, he stopped and turned his face skyward, nostrils working. Slowly, he turned to face the wind.

A gray, cottony vapor was rising against the sun. Smoke! The acrid smell most dreaded by lumbermen. Cliff Boyer shouted: "Fire!"

THE lean lumberman dashed to the brink of the meadow while Jim leaped into his saddle and followed. On the ridge, he stopped and his mouth hardened. He could see it now, a red wall rolling along this side of the valley. The black smoke of burning pitch roiled thickly upward. Cursing, he looked down at Cliff. "Get your wife and kid started for the lake. It's coming this way and it'll sweep on through Carter's and Demning's. Tell her to hurry. I'll sound the alarm. You get to Piny Ridge."

Without waiting for an answer, Jim slapped his horse and struck straight up the hill side. On Lonesome Peak was a rock cairn with an iron triangle and sledge with which to strike it. The sound would rouse the whole valley. Jim's father had organized these cairns throughout the lower Timberlock for just such an emergency.

Ashes and hot embers were beginning to rain about him when he reached the tocsin. As he reined down at his side, a cry of dismay broke from his lips. The standard had been knocked down, the

triangle and sledge thrown into the low brush.

With smoke stinging his nostrils and making him cough violently, Jim searched for the chain that had held the triangle. It was gone. He knew then that this fire was the work of man and not one of Nature's mysterious combustions. Someone had destroyed this alarm deliberately.

Cursing his hatred of the men who had committed this crime against the timber, Jim undid the saddle of his horse and used the cinch strap to hang the triangle to a low limb. Securely fastened, he swung the sledge mightily. The metallic waves boomed and rolled out across Timberlock.

He stayed there sounding the alarm until heat drove him away. Then he flung himself upon the bare back of his animal and dug his fingers into its mane. The spooked horse turned and lit out at a killing gallop.

Once into the clear again, he turned his mount toward Piny Ridge, where the men would be gathering to make a stand. Even as he raced across country, he could see the bright flashings of the heliograph signals of men in the high reaches as their dots and dashes told of the speed and direction of the fire. This was another of Jim's father's innovations; one which had saved many lives and many thousands of feet of timber.

Jim quit his horse, slapping it on the rump and letting it continue on to its corral when he reached Piny Ridge. He joined the group of grim visaged men who had answered the first call. More were coming, toiling up the slope with axes and shovels. The group's faces were turned upward, reading the mirror-manipulated flashes. One man translated aloud: "Began at Ridell corner. Direction—south—speed—twenty miles—"

Jim didn't listen to any more. The men were turning, looking at him, their faces grim. They showed that they, too, understood the import of that message. Whoever had started the blaze had intended to burn the Ridell stand. But they did not know the vagary of the wind here in the lower Timberlock. Once the sun began to settle over the farthest rim of the Cascades, the down draft turned the wind into a southerly direction. That could mean but one thing. The fire had been set by an upper valley man. With Jim Ridell burned out the Badnoch contract would have died a natural death.

SHAKING off his thoughts, Jim snapped: "How wide a front?"

"Quarter mile," answered the man who had been interpreting the messages.

"We might be able to box it against the rocky side of Owhee," said Jim. "Some of you top this ridge, falling the trees forward. The rest of you stretch out along the talus and fall your timber back, not into it. Let's go!"

With a shout, the men set to work. Axes began chunking solidly into bark. Chips flew. Jim led the men down the slope to the talus of Piny Ridge. Grabbing a spare axe, he began blazing the line he wanted felled. Grimly, he set to work with the rest when that was done. If a wide enough swathe could be cut in time, the fire could be held here. If not—

Blinded by sweat and smoke and falling ashes, the men labored like demons. There was no need for heliographs now. The crackling of the swift flames could be heard. The heat grew steadily worse. Women were coming from the lake now with buckets of water. No one stopped to drink, they kept right on working as the buckets were poured over them. Clothing steamed.

Nor did anyone pay heed to the wild life rushing by. There a buck deer raced through the trees, his wildly shrilling does at his side. Tawny cats filtered through the pall, tails switching with fear. Snakes, squirrels, rabbits, wolves, became strange

companions now with the fire on their tails.

With a groan of fatigue, Jim straightened and peered through tear-shot, smoke-swollen eyes. The Rocky Gorge construction crew had joined the fight. There was Bob Borden slaving with the others. Gloomy Carse's sapling-like old body was jack-knifing on the busy end of a buck saw. Monte Ladeau, construction foreman, swung his great strength into an axe head, making the chips fly like papers suddenly caught in a dust devil.

Now a shout went up. A burning ember had leaped the firebreak and ignited the mass of felled branches and trees. Daring painful burns, a rush of boots stomped it out. Another blaze started down the way. Frantically, the exhausted men raced for it. Then Jim was shouting for order. His numbed brain told him they were licked. They would only wear themselves out chasing these small fires and then become victims of the main flames.

"To the lake!" he shouted. "It's our only chance."

Slowly, the men straightened and eyed their work. It had been for naught. Putting their backs to the blaze, they ran for the safety of the water.

Jim was one of the last to leave. Sick inside, he trotted with head hanging. In an attempt to hurt him, the Big Three had placed a scar across Timberlock Valley that would take a century to heal. Everything wasn't gone, but more than twenty families would be wiped out. Jim's heart ached for them.

Now he stumbled and sprawled to the ground. When he picked himself up, he thought he had tripped over a log. Then he could see it was a man. Mustering the last of his strength, he reached down and slung the limp body over his shoulder, staggered on toward the watery haven ahead.

Willing hands helped Jim at the water's edge. They took the man from his shoulder and carried him into the lake. Jim saw that he had been carrying Cliff Boyer, the lean lumberjack, who had refused to help him.

Jim joined the group that stood neck deep in the water. Women were relieved of holding their children by men scarcely better able to exert the strength. The youngsters sobbed with fear and most women's cheeks were wet with tears. The men's heads hung dully from fatigue and wrath.

Embers hissed and whistled as they rained down. Here and there a snake had to be fended off. The water grew tepid, the smoke hung low and ashes made breathing difficult.

The fire raced to the shore line, sending out great red tongues. But there was no more food for the hungry feelers and slowly they withdrew into the black, charred maw.

So intense had been the pall, no one was conscious of the change into night. With the clearing of the smoke, a ghostly moon made grotesque figures of the naked trees. Slowly, the benumbed people crept out onto the bank, stretching out and falling into the sleep of misery and exhaustion.

Jim Ridell, Bob Borden, Carse and Ladeau formed a despondent group. In jerky sentences, Jim told them Cliff Boyer's reaction to the Badnoch contract. He finished with, "You see, they figured I would go through with it anyhow, so they tried to burn me out."

Borden's fists clenched. "We're done," he said tersely. "Badnoch went ahead with construction hoping it would bring the people around. For little or no money, Bastrop, Shadrow and Gardner can complete the dams and charge you people toll for driving."

Jim nodded glum agreement and stared into the charred and smoldering area. A hand touched his shoulder and he turned to look into the begrimed face of Cliff Boyer.

"I want to thank you—" he began.

"Forget it," Jim cut him off.

"I'm forgetting nothing," said the man harshly. "I took a punch on the jaw from the Big Three and I let them scare me—but by God they can't burn me out! I haven't anything left with which to work on that Badnoch contract but my hands. If you want to fight them, Ridell, I'll work for you; for nothing!"

HIS vehement words brought others. They formed a tight, silent group.

"It's too late," said Jim solemnly. "And we can't expect the Badnoch people to do all this dam work for nothing. That thirty percent of the drive is just as important to them as any of it."

A man spoke out of the darkness. "I'll work. If there's a share for me, I'll throw it all in."

"Me, too," said another.

Stirred by this show, Jim got slowly to his feet. "The Big Three meant to cripple me because I was the only one standing against them," he said flatly. "Sure, we haven't any proof that they started the fire, but we don't need any. It speaks for itself. You boys line up with me and we'll beat them yet. We'll log that half million feet off my property, share and share alike, one third of those shares to go to the company. One contract should get us another. You who have timber left can work it and I'll work for you the same way you work for me. In the meantime, we can reforest the burned area. Join our forces and we've a better than even chance to get through. They'll strike again to keep us from getting to the mills, but if we stick close we can do it. You all want to work like that?"

"Count me in," said Cliff Boyer. Acceptances ran around the circle.

Borden ejaculated, "Good! The company will be pleased. I'll have the Eagle Point ready by the rains."

Jim said, "All the families who have been burned out and want to join up, come to my place. The women can keep us fed, the kids can haul the firewood. It won't be easy, but we can beat 'em."

"When do we start?" came an eager question.

"Tomorrow morning," said Jim. "Be at my place at sunrise. Bring all the equipment you have."

Slowly, the men began collecting their families and vanishing into the darkness. Jim plunged his burned hands deep into his pockets and grinned down at Gloomy Carse. For once the dour oldster had no comment.

The ruinous blaze started by the Big Three had backfired on them, cementing the lower Timberlock into one unit. This would be a real community fight. Jim expelled a long breath. This would be a lumber country yet. He wondered what Jerry Gardner would think of the fire. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Fighting Finish

IT WAS a motley crew that pulled into Jim Ridell's place with the first gray lances of dawn. Some came in wagons piled high with household goods. Others walked in, their only possessions the axes in their hands.

Swiftly, Jim got them organized. The rains would begin in three weeks; and two weeks after that the logs had to be at the Badnoch mill. Laughing and calling to each other, the women took charge of the main cabin and sheds. They rigged beds and bunks and it wasn't long before order came out of chaos. The men, headed by Jim and Gloomy, worked the wooded slopes, putting their bark mark on the trees that would be cut. When a sufficient number had been blazed to keep the cutters busy, the haulers scouted out

(Continued on page 101)

GUN SHY

By
JAY KARTH

Wolf's big cutter had hammered orange flame and gunsmoke at him. . . .

Even four years after that brutal gun-whipping, the sight of cold steel made young Rusty Farnow tremble. But Rusty realized finally, that there would never be peace for Big Smoky—or for himself—until he faced Wolf Starr's Colts again . . . with his bare hands!

WHEN the long freight train rolled into the west end of the Dunphy yards Rusty Farnow dropped to the hard-packed cinder-path between the rails. The sudden exertion warmed him momentarily. But as he fumbled for his Durham sack with stiff fingers the chill of the October night again pervaded his entire being. His teeth chattered like castanets. He gave up trying to roll the cigarette. Hunching his shoulders, he pulled the narrow collar of the faded blue denim jumper up under his unshaven chin. He held it there while his body shook uncontrollably. The spasm passed and he moved toward the one-sided street fronting the tracks.

The sound of steers moving about in loading pens off to his left drew him in that direction. A string of cattle cars had been set out on the loading track. Rusty climbed between two cars, dropping on the opposite side. He drifted along beside the pens, pressed close in an instinctive effort to catch some of the body-warmth from the grass-fattened animals.

"Freeze!"

Iron bands clamped around Rusty's heart as the voice reached him. The hard muzzle of a gun dug into his back. The iron bands constricted. His hands shot skyward. He did not speak. He could not. His tongue seemed glued to the roof of his mouth.

"See who it is, Lew." The gun prodded warningly.

A match flared and a second man peered into Rusty's dirty, stubble-covered face. "Hell, he's jist a bum, Buck. Must of got off that freight yonder. He's scared stiff."

The gun prodded again. "On yuh'r way, tramp. An' if yuh ain't hankerin' fer lead colic stay away f'm these pens tonight." The unseen Buck gave Rusty a shove. Rusty heard the shrill whistle of an engine. The freight he had just left jerked into motion. A trainman called out, somewhere beyond the cattle cars. Rusty heard a voice answer. Buck and Lew drifted back into the darkness surrounding the loading pens.

His muscles jerking convulsively, Rusty hurried in the opposite direction. This brought him out of the yards a hundred feet from a small lighted restaurant. He turned across the dark, rutted street toward this building. Reaching the door he stepped inside. The odors of cooking food assailed his nostrils. The unaccustomed warmth of the room sent a cloud whirling darkly across his vision . . . .

When he opened his eyes he saw the familiar wrinkled face of old Luey Yong, owner of the restaurant. The old man spoke. "You be all right, now. You hungry, huh?"

Rusty nodded. He wondered if the old Chinaman recognized him after these years, and with his two weeks' beard. He looked around. Luey must have pulled him back here. He lay in the small kitchen.

The Chinaman pattered across the floor to the stove, returning with a steaming bowl of meat broth. "You sittee up, huh —takee this down gullet. Feel much bettah—"

AS RUSTY pulled himself up he was suddenly dizzy. Luey's face whirled in his vision for a moment, then cleared. Luey handed him the bowl. "You eatee slow," he cautioned. The front door opened with a bang. Luey padded out. Rusty heard him say, "Hello, Mista Stah —you likee big steak?"

A rough voice growled, "We want coffee, Chink, an' don't talk so dam' much!"

Rusty almost choked on a mouthful of the hot broth. He turned very pale under the reddish-brown beard. His hunger-gaunted face seemed to grow even thinner. His long fingers trembled so that he sloshed the hot broth on the legs of his levis. Wolf Starr! Wolf Starr of the Ox-Yoke!

Four years! God, it seemed like no more than four months since he last heard that grating voice. For this was Rusty Farnow's town, the only world he had known until four years ago. From Dunphy on the railroad to Big Smoky Basin forty miles north, had been Rusty's weaning ground.

Wolf Starr and bitter-tongued, salty old Tally Farnow, Rusty's pa, had been at war before Rusty was born. For more than two decades they had battled with words and fists and guns for control of Big Smoky. Scarcely a month in Rusty's recollection had passed that a fresh mound was not thrown up over the bullet-riddled body of Flying-M or Ox-Yoke rider. Rusty had been weaned on the muzzle of a Colt Peacemaker. He had hated that life. For Rusty had made a promise . . . .

With the continued killings of his bunkhouse pards, he slowly acquired a growing, cankerous hatred and fear of this deadly warfare. It was so pointless for the two big spreads like the Flying-M and

the Ox-Yoke, both with plenty of good graze and water, to kill and be killed for land which neither actually needed.

The Chinaman padded into the kitchen and Rusty knew that the Oriental had recognized him, notwithstanding the great change that had taken place during the four years of his absence. Luey held one yellow finger to his lips until he was sure that Rusty understood, then went about getting coffee for the two men outside.

Rusty remembered the day Wolf Starr had ridden up on him at the Flying-M line cabin on Jerrel's Creek and forced him into a gun-brawl. Rusty shuddered. Hell, he had only been sixteen that day. He had not drawn his holstered gun because he remembered the promise he had made, and when Wolf's big cutter had hammered orange flame and gun-smoke at him he screamed in mortal terror. Keeping his promise in the face of this thundering death had drowned his mind in a horror-filled well of fear. When Wolf Starr rode away from the scene he had left Rusty grovelling on the ground, screaming madly, clenching a small black object in his two hands . . . .

THE word had spread across the range that old Tally Farnow's whelp was gun-shy, yellow. When Tally heard it from his top hand he gun-whipped the man senseless, then hunted up Rusty and bull-whipped him within an inch of his life.

When he recovered from the beating, Rusty had saddled his buckskin pony and left the Flying-M and Big Smoky Basin behind. For four years he had tried to whip the awful thing that ate at his vitals. But now he knew that he had failed. The feel of the gun in his back out by the loading pens had turned the blood in his veins to ice; Wolf Starr's voice had turned the ice into water.

The two men were seated no more than six feet from Rusty. Tobacco smoke curled through a crack in the thin wall. Wolf Starr's companion said, "They's about four hundred head of stuff in them loadin' pens across the road, Wolf, an' two Flyin'-M gunnies a-ridin' herd on 'em, but I'll be a breed hoss-thief if I don't think ev'y head of that stuff's culls—"

"That's what I thought," growled the owner of the Ox-Yoke. "The old fox is loadin' his parlor stuff at that Flyin'-M sidin' ten miles west o' here. Thinks he's pullin' a-cutey." Starr was silent as Luey padded out with the coffee. When the Chinaman returned to the kitchen, he continued, "Old Tally had a gather of five hundred two year old pushed down out of the hills two days ago. I figure they're bein' loaded at that sidin', an' that the train should ought to be humpin' through here any minute now. If anything happens to them steers—say at Thunder Creek Canyon—"

"Yuh mean—"

"Hell, why not? It'll finish the Flyin'-M. Old Tally won't be able to bring feeders up from Texas, an' he won't be able to meet a note comin' due at the bank in two weeks—an' I own the note!" Wolf Starr chuckled triumphantly.

The second man whistled softly. "An' old Tally'll be on thet train! He allus tends his own shipments—"

"I'll be on her, too," growled Wolf Starr meaningly, "for a spell—"

Rusty heard a coin slap on the counter. Spurs jingled as the two men got underway. Luey called out, "Good-night, Mista Stah—thank you—" He shuffled out to pick up the coin and the empty cups.

"I want you to . . ." Wolf Starr's harsh voice trailed off as he pushed through the door. Then the door slammed . . . .

Rusty must have fainted. When he opened his eyes his cheeks were stinging and his throat burned. He looked around. Luey had poured whiskey down his throat and was slapping his cheeks with his open

palm. The Chinaman grinned vacuously as Rusty opened his eyes. "Belly plenty empty, Lusty. Me fix."

Rusty muttered, "Thanks, Luey." Sudden shame ran through him like hot flame as he realized how he must look. He climbed to his feet and clumped across the kitchen, where he filled a pan with hot water from the stove.

As he washed the words of Wolf Starr ran riot through his mind. They were going to wreck a trainload of Flying-M cattle. And his pa, Tally Farnow, was going to be on that train. Wolf Starr was going to ride her, too—*for a spell!*

HELL, Starr had meant that old Tally was going into Thunder Creek Canyon with that trainload of steers!

"Lusty." Luey padded from the stove to a small table in a corner of the kitchen. He deposited a steaming steak into a plate. "You come tie aloun' this here steak—"

"Luey!" Rusty grasped the Oriental's arm. "You listen close for a train from the West!"

Luey barked, "Eatee steak. Me fixee t'ain. Me gettee coffee now."

Rusty dropped into the chair. The steak was tender beyond anything he had tasted for months. Luey planted a steaming cup of black coffee beside the plate. He dropped onto a stool opposite Rusty. "You know who come?"

"Wolf Starr."

"You heah talk?"

Rusty nodded.

"What you do?"

"I've got to stop him," muttered Rusty. His head was lowered.

Luey studied him through slitted eyes. Finally he nodded to himself. He disappeared through a door. When he reappeared a moment later he had in his arms a pair of chaps, a warm blanket coat, and a gun belt. He deposited these on the floor beside the table, then disappeared again. He returned this time with a cedar-handled .45 gripped gingerly between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. He placed the gun on the table beside Rusty's plate.

"Catchee whole dam' outfit in dice game," he chuckled. "You takee."

Rusty stared at the long-barreled cutter lying inches from his hands.

The Chinaman's voice reached him as from afar off. "Rusty—me think you run from shadow. Me think you run from hate—not from feah." He talked on, in his soft Oriental voice, and Rusty felt strangely soothed. "In China," said Luey, "when tooth pain, is pulled out by root. Youah trouble is that root, not in you—but in Wolf Stah. You pullee out—all fix."

Rusty reached for tobacco. Somehow his fingers were steady as he built the slender tube and shoved it between his lips. The old Chinaman, watching Rusty's face through slitted lids, might have nodded to himself in satisfaction, although the movement was imperceptible. Perhaps this old Oriental really had something. Rusty reached out his right hand. For the first time in four years he wrapped his fingers around the cold butt of a cutter. And suddenly he was at peace. Fear had fled. Tally Farnow—Wolf Starr. What right had those two old mossyhorns to make life in Big Smoky Basin an endless round of gun-battles and death and unhappiness? What right had they to send good men out to die on forty a month and beans? Luey was right, but the roots were deeply implanted in both of those crusty old hellions, not Wolf Starr alone. Tonight Wolf Starr had every intention of destroying five hundred head of Tally Farnow's best parlor steers, and perhaps old Tally in the bargain. Yesterday or last year it had been the other way around. The roots had to be yanked out of both of them if peace were to be brought back to Big Smoky. Rusty

reached for the chaps just as an engine's whistle shrilled.

THE twenty-two car cattle train had had slowed at the yard limit, but now was picking up speed rapidly. Rusty caught the third cattle car ahead of the drovers' coach. He waited almost too long. He thought agonizingly that his arms would be pulled out of their sockets, as the speed of the train whipped his body flat against the side of the car. But he made it safely. The wind whipped sharply between the cars, but with steak and coffee under his belt and the new warmth-preserving chaps and blanket-coat protecting him from the cutting blast, he felt more comfortable than he had for a long time.

He climbed up until he was level with the top of the car. Here the wind slapped against his exposed cheeks with greater force. Cinder-filled smoke from the engine up ahead whipped acridly by. Rusty peered toward the drovers' coach, just ahead of the caboose. He stiffened and dropped his head slightly as he saw a dark figure crouched low on the top of the next car back. But this figure was turned facing the rear of the train and Rusty went unobserved.

He reached down, then cursed. He had lost the gun out of his holster when his body had whipped against the side of the cattle-car. He tightened the collar of the blanket-coat around his throat to hold out a sudden feeling of intense chill. He realized now that it was quite cold: his fingers stuck to the metal ladder-rung each time he shifted his hands. He could hear the steers in the car below, swaying stiff-legged with the rough motion of the car. The click of the rails snapped up to him.

That the figure glued to the car top was Wolf Starr, Rusty had not the slightest doubt. He wondered when Wolf intended making his move against old Tally, back there in the drovers' coach. The thought occurred to him that Big Smoky would be a better place to live if both of these old hellions played out their hands here tonight, even though they both died. Rusty shifted the weight of his body from his right foot to the left. The train hit the upgrade five miles east of Dunphy and slowed perceptibly as the engine puffed toward the summit. Two miles beyond the summit lay Thunder Creek Canyon. Rusty shuddered. The train, gathering speed on the down-grade, plunging into that trap. . . .

The figure clinging to the top of the car came to life. In a half crouch the sinister shape reached the opposite end of the car, leaped across to the net and continued on toward the drovers' coach. Rusty saw him reach for the metal ladder-rungs. A moment later he disappeared from view as he climbed down toward the platform of the coach.

Rusty leaped atop the car and followed. He hoped the sound of his tapping boot-heels would escape the notice of the man ahead of him. As he neared the end of the car just ahead of the drovers' coach he dropped to his hands and knees. He crept the last twelve feet in this manner, until he was peering down upon the platform. It was empty.

He lowered himself swiftly. Reaching the level of the platform he leaped across. Edging over so that he could see into the car, yet remain invisible beyond the outer fringe of the dim radiance escaping through the door, he peered inside.

Wolf Starr, his teeth bared in a wolfish grin, faced Old Tally across the narrow width of the coach. Wolf held a cutter in his right hand. Rusty saw the Ox-Yoke owner say something to Tally Farnow. Tally's rock-like jaw pushed out. His mouth opened once like the jaws of a trap, then snapped shut over the words thrown into Wolf's grinning face. Rusty saw his pa leap at Wolf, straight at the gaping maw of the threatening gun. Old Tally had guts. No doubt about that.

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BUT guts didn't help him against the crashing force of Wolf's gun barrel as it slammed against the side of his gray-thatched skull. Rusty saw Tally go down, his head banging against the wall. Wolf Starr bent over the Flying-M mogul's head, the heavy gun in his hand uplifted . . . .

Rusty, at sight of Wolf's sardonic, granite-hewn face, had felt a recurrence of that old weakness. A panic gripped him. For a moment he was on the verge of leaping off the platform into the rushing darkness. And then Tally went down, and Rusty saw Wolf Starr raise the gun to deal a finishing blow.

Before he fully realized what was taking place, Rusty was inside the coach.

Wolf Starr jerked erect. Surprise held him tight for a moment. His jaw dropped. "What in hell—" He stared at this gaunt apparition with the reddish-brown beard.

"Drop that cutter, Starr!" Rusty's voice sounded strange in his ears. The world had gone crazy. Unarmed, he had ordered this granite-brained man to drop his gun. Cold crept into the very marrow of his bones, yet he moved inexorably into the coach toward the murder-bent owner of the Ox-Yoke. His red-rimmed eyes held steady on the face of his father's ancient enemy.

Dawning recognition brought a harsh, crooked smile to Wolf Starr's lips. "If it ain't old Tally's whelp," he growled softly, the muzzle of the gun sweeping around, "come back for more."

Rusty leaped. He saw orange flame erupt from the muzzle of Starr's gun. The slug tore into his shoulder muscles, slowing him momentarily, but he felt only a sense of savage joy that he could still move, that he would be able to get his hands on the throat of the man who had made his life a living hell for as long as he could remember. The roar of the big gun seemed to reach him long after he had

felt the smashing impact of the slug.

The gun blasted a second time, and Rusty felt the slug hit his chest with a jolt like the kick of a mule. He heard someone sob aloud just as the light from the kerosene lamp hanging suspended from the center of the car's ceiling grew dim. He was falling then. His last thought was that it was himself he had heard sobbing. His hands groped for a faded black object in his shirt pocket . . . .

It seemed a long time later that he opened his eyes. He lay still. He was lying on his back, and he could feel a tight bandage around his chest and shoulder. The click, click of wheels on rails told him that he was still in the drovers' coach. Out of the corner of his eyes he could see the flickering flame of the kerosene lamp. He was stretched out on a bunk made from the cushions of three seats. Suddenly he was horribly aware of his reason for being on this train. He jerked erect, crying, "Tally! The Thunder Creek bridge! Stop the train!" Weakness overcame him. He fell back across the bunk.

HE HEARD his father's voice. For the first time in his recollection, Old Tally's voice was not harsh. Rather, it was subdued, humble. "It's all right—Rusty—"

"But Wolf Starr's goin' to wreck the bridge, Tally!"

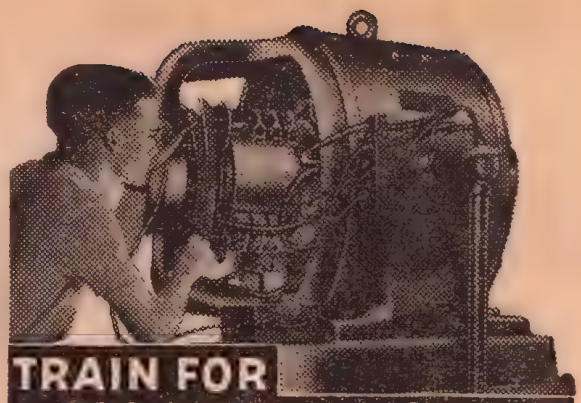
"It's all right, boy," repeated Tally Farnow. "We've — we've crossed the bridge—now. I'm thinkin' there'll never be another."

"That's right, Kid."

Amazement forced Rusty's eyes around. Wolf Starr stood at Tally Farnow's shoulder. And there was no fight in the fierce old eyes. They were filled with a plea for forgiveness.

"What—"

"Wolf here stopped the train, Rusty,"



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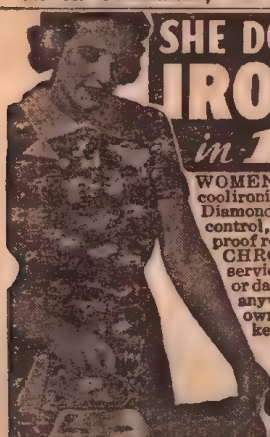

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said old Tally, "thanks to you—before his men blew up the bridge."

"But why?"

Wolf Starr's face was shame-filled as he blurted, "On account o' this, Kid—" He held out a black object. It was the little black Bible which Rusty had carried since his mother's death. Looking at the little book Rusty realized how he had survived that second blast from Wolf's gun. The slug was still imbedded in the sheets.

"You never knowed why Wolf's Ox-Yoke an' the Flyin'-M was at war, did you, Rusty?" asked old Tally.

"No—"

"Me an' Wolf both loved yore maw, an' I won out—"

"When yore maw married Tally here," broke in Wolf Starr, "she made us promise, with our hands on this here Bible, that we'd never fight each other—"

"We both broke that promise," said Tally sadly.

"Are you two tellin' me there's goin' to be peace in Big Smoky" choked Rusty.

The two hard-bitten kingpins of Big Smoky nodded their battle-scarred heads.

"But what have I—"

Wolf extended his right hand, containing the mutilated Bible. "You made a promise on this book, too, didn't you, Kid? *A promise you kept—*"

Rusty looked at Wolf. He reached up and took the Bible from the old fighter's horny hand. The lines were written on the inside of the cover, written by his mother just before she died. How well he knew them. They read:

> My Son—You have promised me that you will never raise your hand to deal death to your fellow man. As you love my memory, hold to this promise.

"An' he did it—" Old Tally Farnow's voice was awe-filled, proud.

"An' that," said Wolf Starr, "in Big Smoky, took guts."

(Continued from page 91)

the best slopes to build the rollways. That evening before the central fire, Jim warned them.

"With the felling of the first tree tomorrow begins the fight. Bastrop, Shadrow and Gardner aren't going to lay back and give us a free rein to drive to the mill. I don't know when or how they'll strike, but they will. Any of you who want to reconsider throwing in with me can do so, with no questions asked."

After a long pause, he went on: "Good! We're all in this together and the closer we stand the harder it'll be to axe us down. These aren't just my logs you cut now. They're yours, too. It's share and share alike. We start at dawn."

Silently, the men turned from the fire and went to their beds.

Gloomy helped Jim bank the fading coals and watched the youngster sharply. He saw something pressing Jim's shoulders down.

"You're takin' this too serious, son. You've got things on a down hill pull now."

Jim shook his head. "Maybe I'm making a mistake, Gloomy. If this drive doesn't go through everybody's broke."

"If it does go through, everybody's rich," said Gloomy.

"If I wasn't crazy stubborn to whip the Big Three and see this lower country grow, these people would be working for them now and getting cash for their labors. As it is, we'll have to depend on hunting for our food. If I fail to deliver, these men and their wives and children will starve this winter."

"Shut up!" said Gloomy. Then he chuckled: "Quit stealing my stuff."

That cracked the grimness of Jim's lips. He bedded down beside Gloomy and fell asleep listening to the oldster's philosophy.

"A fella never gets anything without taking a chance. That jigger, Columbus?

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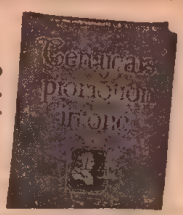

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He didn't think about his men, he just kept drivin' on. An' Lewis and Clark. If they'd uh thought of themselves there wouldn't be no Northwest. The Big Three. They fought to get what they got with all the dirty methods they knew; and they'll fight to hold it the same way. Nothin's won by worryin'. You want somethin'—you start right in and you'll get it if you try hard enough—if you don't stop a bullet or. . . ."

FOR three weeks the slopes of the lower Timberlock echoed the crash of falling timber. The moment the bull pines hit the ground a crew attacked them and bucked them into log lengths. Then the bummers hauled them to the rollways where men at spar trees piled them, wedging them expertly so they might be rolled into the Eagle Point basin.

Leaden skies began to roll out of the North. On Tuesday the first drops of autumn rain pattered down. The haggard, bearded lumberjacks raised their faces to it, sticking out their tongues to taste its sour sweetness. Then they renewed their vigor, a song on their lips:

> "We'll drive 'em down the Pitt, boys,
> And make the big saws hum—"

Jim Ridell spent his time directing operations. With an eye to the water rising behind the dam, he went from rollway to rollway estimating the footage. The half million feet were nearly cut. The day he gave the signal to release the first rollway, he stood silent and serious amid the cheering men who watched the logs careen crazily down the slope and hit the waters of the Pitt with a mighty slash. Gloomy Carse shook his head dolefully. The tension had worked into him.

"That starts it," he said. "Wonder where the lightnin' strikes?"

Jim shrugged. "Everything's been too

quiet again. I've figured every angle and can't see what they're waiting for; unless it's to jam us after we start the drive."

"They'll have to fight before they can do that," said Gloomy stoutly. "With you at their head, these boys will be plenty hard to stop now."

"Get down to the lower rollways and start the logs," Jim ordered. "I'm going up above. Each crew has five thousand more feet to go, but have them keep them rolling as they cut."

The men returned to their cutting and hauling. Gloomy headed for the lower levels while Jim turned up valley. He was nearing his destination when a solitary figure on the trail slowed his stride and brought an exclamation from his lips: "Jerry!" He quickened his pace.

Her lovely face was streaked with tears, tears that spoke more of anger and humiliation than of grief.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

"Dad," she managed. "He's held Bastrop and Shadrock back from attacking you, but now they have him prisoner. They—they might kill him—"

"They can't—" began Jim, but broke off as steel punched against his back. He could tell who it was by the expression on Jerry's face. He turned slowly.

The hammer of Link Bastrop's rifle was back. He said, "We figured if we let her go she'd find you for us. Get along, both of you." He reached out and took the pistol from Jim's waist band. Two other men stepped from the trees with rifles in their hands.

Taking Jerry's arm and giving it a squeeze of assurance, Jim allowed Link to prod him off the trail toward the rim that led to the upper Timberlock. Jerry was silent at his side, trembling a little with fear. Anger seethed within Jim.

They hurried him and the girl over the rim and along a trail. At the tote road, they turned sharply onto Bastrop

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property and came to the spacious cabin. The yard was filled with lumberjacks, tough, hard-bitten men who knew only the law of calked boots and fists. Jim was surprised at their numbers. He and Jerry were prodded up the steps and into the living room of the house.

Keo Bastrop's heavy featured face split into a wide grin at the sight of Jim. Chet Shadrow scowled. John Gardner, sitting between them, fidgeted nervously.

Link said, "Ran right to him."

Jim spread his hands on the ornate desk around which these men sat and said, "You're stooping pretty low when you use a woman for kidnapping bait!"

Keo chuckled harshly, "Listen to the deacon-lumberman trying to put the hooks into us. Sorry to have put you out."

"Shut up!" Shadrow thundered at Jim. "We brought you here to make you a proposition. Another remark like that—and we won't make it."

"Proposition?" Jim's eyes narrowed.

Keo nodded. "We'll pay off the men you've had working for you, see that your drive gets through and that you get all the profits."

Jim hesitated for a moment. "What will you gain, Bastrop?"

Bastrop became confidential. "The lower valley people are solidly behind you. If you lease out to us, the rest will follow suit. That way we can keep prices up. We'll give you a fair deal on your land."

JOHN GARDNER rose and went over to lean against the mantel of the stone fireplace. Jim studied Keo and Chet, seeing what lay behind their offer. They would accept him into their circle of power just to crush the others. They would pay him a fair price to swing the rest of them, then they would begin to starve the lower valley out. These men would give him power, make him one of them—a hypocrite. Slowly, he shook his head.

"No," he said emphatically. "You tried to stop me with fire, but that backfired against you. Like I said—you're done, all of you; and I'll see to the finish."

Keo and Chet surged to their feet, faces writhing. Link clicked back the hammer of his rifle and said, "I'll let him have it." Jerry's hands flew to her throat. "Don't!" she cried.

Then a sterner command filled the room. John Gardner said, "Don't anyone move. First man who does, gets these!" His fists were filled with the brace of guns that hung over the mantel. Keo and Chet had been so sure of swinging Jim that they had not noticed Gardner.

The men swung on John, Bastrop cursing, "You fool, you're losing your mind."

"Maybe," said John tersely. "But that's better than losing my respect for myself. I've been willing to make every legal fight that could be made to halt the lower Timberlock. We found out through our lawyers we didn't have a leg to stand on. Against my wishes you tried to burn Ridell out, but that failed, too, and you only succeeded in welding the valley into a stronger unit against us. They deserve what they've worked for, and by God I'll see they get it. Get out of here, Jim."

Jerry's eyes were shining with pride as Jim nodded curtly to the lumberman. "You won't regret this, sir," he said.

"Regret?" echoed Gardner. "I regret I ever listened to Bastrop and Shadrow. There's room for all of us to do business here. Bastrop, you step over to the door and tell those men out in the yard that it's all right for Jim to leave. And don't make me wait too long, Keo."

There was a threat in his voice and every one in the room knew he would back it. Cursing luridly, Keo went to the door and called out, "Ridell's free to go."

Jim grabbed Jerry's hand. "You're coming along," he said.

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29x5.25-19	2.45	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.50	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.80	1.15
5.50-17	2.75	1.15
29x5.50-18	2.75	1.15
29x5.50-19	2.75	1.15
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She tried to pull away, saying, "Father—"

"Go along," Gardner ordered. "I'll hold 'em for a while. . . ."

Jerry nodded and moved to Jim's side. He was glad she didn't notice the desperation in her father's eyes; she couldn't picture what would happen here once they were gone. Jim was about to refuse to leave when the oldster noticed his hesitation and said, "It's better this way, son. One man can sometimes do a lot more than two. Your people need you. You've got to go!"

Jim nodded humbly and led Jerry from the room.

Clear of the yard, he urged the girl into a hard run. Night overtook them as they reached the ridge that led down into the lower Timberlock. Jim had to stop several times while Jerry rested, but there was no pursuit. John Gardner was still holding out. He was giving his life the hard way to the people of lower Timberlock, the people he had fought. It was a gesture befitting John Gardner, who had built his empire the hard way, who would give a man his last dollar . . . or his life. . . .

When they reached the cabin Jim routed out the camp and told them what had happened. He finished with, "To hell with that few extra feet we have to cut. We drive in the morning. The deadline's only a week away."

The men paid silent tribute to John Gardner and refused to return to their beds. They sat about the fire, talking excitedly of when the first log would sluice over the Eagle Point toward the mill.

Jim turned Jerry over to the women and joined his crew. Despite the tragedy he knew was being enacted up country, his spirit was lifted. He had seen a man ready to forfeit his life for a principle. Just like these people here had chanced everything to get out from under the yoke of suppression.

Gloomy squatted at his side and said dourly, "I don't see what you got to be so happy about. This drive ain't finished yet."

Jim didn't answer, his eyes strayed to where Jerry stood with the women just beyond the fire glow. . . .

UNDER a lowering sky, the day began. Jim Ridell led his crew down to the dam. They were armed with peaveys and pike poles. As they burst into the clearing where the earthworks tied into the far bank, they suddenly stopped short.

Men were boiling from behind trees, lining the banks. They sullenly awaited the Ridell crew. Sometime during the night, John Gardner's blockade had crumbled.

Jim bit his lips. His bunch was outnumbered two to one. Cliff Boyer stepped up. "What are we waiting on?" he asked.

Jim motioned them on, fists balled, remembering what Gardner had given to prevent this.

The two groups came together with curses and flying fists. Jim called to his men to fight shoulder to shoulder and not engage in personal combat. That would mean sure defeat.

Swinging, slashing at faces before him, he sought out Link Bastrop. Cash Wonder, Bastrop's foreman, went down under his fists. He wanted to get his hands on Link, to break him in two, to finish off the leader.

The thugs fought hard, but without enthusiasm. But a wild, primitive anger possessed the men of lower Timberlock and they fought with relentless fury. Men went down and were trampled beneath calked boots if they couldn't crawl away. No quarter was asked and none was given. It was a brutal fight.

Jim Ridell was a Tartar among them.

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He tore and slugged and hammered, searching for a glimpse of Link. He saved all his hatred and anger so he might vent it against the arrogance and cruelty for which Link stood.

But Link was not among the fighters. Jim thought that strange, but he had no time to dwell upon it.

The battle surged to the water's edge. Then out upon the sea of logs as the thugs gave ground before the furious charge of the Ridell crew. Blows landed and bodies went down. Logs spun and men plunged into the water. Then the hard labor of the past months began to swing the fight in favor of Jim's crew. The thugs from town had spent the summer loafing and drinking and they weren't toughened like the Timberlock men.

And suddenly the battle ended in a rout. Bastrop's and Shadrow's cohorts broke and flew across the log field with men in pursuit. They chased their op-

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ponents across the lake and into the woods. They returned with grins on their scarred and bloody faces. Peaveys and pike poles were retrieved and they were ready to begin their drive. As they surged out onto the logs, Gloomy Carse's shout froze them.

"Link Bastrop! Down there by the narrows!"

Heads swung and Jim Ridell cursed grimly.

Link was on a ledge down where the Pitt went into the Narrows. He was digging furiously, and there was a large box beside him. Instantly Jim knew its significance. Dynamite! He intended blowing the bank! If he succeeded he would pile up the drive and it would be weeks before the jam could be broken and sent on. It would be too late to fulfill the contract. This fight had been for the purpose to give him time to set the charges.

Jim groaned. It would take a man an hour to reach him on horse back. He would have to go around the ridge and come down to the ledge. He grabbed up a peavey and shouted, "Break the gates. I'm going down there!"

"You haven't a chance," Gloomy screamed. "No man can ride a log on the crest."

"I've got to try," said Jim. "Break those gates!"

Men surged to the task. Jim skipped across the logs, feeling the surge of released water beneath them. Feet gripping a huge bull pine, knees slightly bent, holding his peavey across his thighs for balance, he shot through the sluice and down canyon.

White water surged around him and curling waves swept the log from end to end. Jim threw his weight this way and that as the log threatened to rush forward and dig. No wild horse ever bucked like this pine. Yet he held his footing, his

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feet twinkling, spinning, guiding, racing up and down to preserve balance. Then he lost control. There was no stopping this huge log from up ending. Throwing his body out and away from it, he hit another log with his calks and reached for the ledge. He missed and went out of sight in the water, but came up with a grip on the rocky edge.

With a desperate effort, Jim pulled himself onto the shelf. Bastrop turned and cursed. Then he was dropping his shovel and rushing. Jim bent forward and met the vicious charge with churning fists.

They crashed together like two bull mooses, their fists smashing against each other's faces and shoulders.

Jim was forced to give ground. Already tired from fighting at the dam, he had to call up every ounce of reserve strength he possessed to keep from being knocked back into the seething mass of logs that raced past.

Panting, exhausted Jim fought doggedly against the bull-like rushes of Link. His shirt was gone now and his body ached as if it were one big wound. But that spark of spirit that would not be conquered continued to burn brightly. Link had hit him with everything he had, but still he came on.

Fear crept into Bastrop's shredded features. He wasn't fighting a man. Jim Ridell was beyond comprehension. He should have gone down ten minutes ago, a battered, bleeding hulk. But there he was, weaving, staggering in, swinging punches like a robot. In one last effort of desperation, Link rushed, his arms flailing.

Jim stumbled against him, swinging a hard right to the ribs. The blow swung Link around and his foot hit soft shale, rock that had been weakened by the rains. With a terrible cry, his arms flung wide and he went off the ledge backwards. Jim

leaned against the sheer wall, head hanging as the sickening scream and sound of scraping logs welled up. The scraping noise continued.

How long he stood thus, he did not know. A touch on his arm brought him out of his stupor. Bob Borden and some others had come down from above. They put strong arms about him for support. Borden pointed up river.

Men were coming down with the logs, skipping nimbly about, breaking up minor jams.

Jim shook the grogginess from his brain and managed a smile. "That's it," he croaked hoarsely. "We're all lumbermen now."

"With prospects," said Borden. "Badnoch has another contract they want you to fill."

Jim nodded. "The community accepts it," he muttered.

"Now we better get back up the hill," said Borden. "There's someone up there dying with worry."

Jim smiled and turned to go. Gloomy Carse shrugged his bony shoulders and said dourly, "He *was* a good man, but once a pretty-faced woman gets ahold of him. . ."

Jim grinned. To him the prospect was not unpleasant. In fact, he knew he'd like it.

THE END

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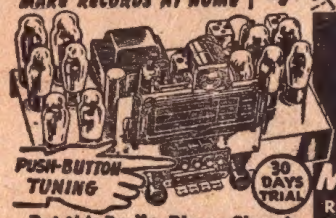

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